

Muslims in the Canadian Mosaic

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Almost one-third of the total population of Muslims in the world today lives as a "minority" in lands where people of other faiths, creeds and ideologies have administrative, political and legislative control. As a religious minority, these Muslims face certain difficulties and challenges in practising their own distinct way of life.¹

This paper, based on a study of the Muslim community in the Canadian National Capital Region (CNCR) conducted in 1992, explores how the Muslim community in the CNCR has integrated itself into Canadian society and how it has sought to maintain its Islamic identity in terms of religious practice and belief. It will demonstrate the impact of Canadian social values and structure on the formation of the Islamic identity of Muslims living in Canada and will also examine some of the ways by which this identity is maintained. This will be achieved by examining previous work in the field, the sociohistorical development and socio-demographic characteristics of the Muslim community in Canada (in particular in the CNCR), and immigration factors. The methodology and techniques used, findings, and conclusions will also be discussed.

Previous Work in the Field

To date, there have been few studies on North American Muslim communities. Those that do exist have focused primarily on the Middle Eastern (i.e., Arab) communities in Canada and the United States. Many have discussed the processes of acculturation and assimilation, in addition to attempts to preserve the traditional values, of these communities. The results have indicated a negative correlation between Islamic observance and non-Islamic societies. Since previous inquiries did not focus on the

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¹Islamic Council of Europe, "Introduction," in *Muslim Communities in Non-Muslim States* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980), ix.

maintenance of Islamic identity within non-Islamic societies, this study represents a pioneer effort in the field and will contribute to providing a greater understanding of the Muslim community within Canada's multi-cultural mosaic.

Sociohistorical Developments

Despite the perception that Muslims are among the most recent immigrants to North America, research has shown that Islam has had a long history in this continent. Eliade confirms that Islam spread to America as early as the sixteenth century.

Of the hundreds of thousands of slaves brought from West Africa by the Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British between 1530 and 1850 to work in mines or on plantations in the American colonies, about 14 to 20 percent were Muslims.²

According to Abu-Laban, "the earliest record of Muslim presence in Canada dates back to 1871, when the Canadian census recorded thirteen Muslim residents."³ The first mosque in North America, al Rashīd, was established in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1938.

Over the last decade, the number of Muslims in Canada has increased immensely, largely as a result of political as well as economic unrest in many Muslim countries. Today, in almost every Canadian city one encounters Muslims, Islamic centers, associations, educational institutions, and/or mosques. In the CNCR, for example, Muslim women dressed in Islamic garb have become extremely visible, particularly during the past few years. According to information collected by Statistics Canada, the census of 3 June 1981 indicated that "there were 98,165 Muslims, accounting for less than half of one percent of all Canadians."⁴ Abu-Laban reports that "[t]oday it is estimated there are about 200,000 Muslims in Canada, the large majority of whom are immigrants or descendants of im-

²Mircea Eliade (ed.), "Islam in the Americas," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 426.

³Earle Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regual Qureshi (eds.), *The Muslim Community in North America* (Edmonton, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 1983), 76; Yvonne Haddad has different information: "The Census for 1881 and 1891 lists their [i.e., Muslims'] number as zero." See Y. Haddad, "Muslims in Canada: A Preliminary Study," in *Religion and Ethnicity*, eds. Coward and Kawamura (Waterloo, Canada: Statistics Canada, 1985), 15-9.

⁴A. Rashid, *The Muslim Canadian: A Profile* (Ottawa, Canada: Statistics Canada, 1985), 15-9.

migrants who arrived within the past twenty-five years."⁵

The largest concentrations of Muslim immigrants are found in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta. Within these provinces, the majority of Muslims reside in Toronto, Windsor, London, Kingston, all of which are located in Ontario, and the National Capital Region of Ottawa. Muslims also live in Montreal and Lac Labiche (Quebec), Halifax (Nova Scotia), and Edmonton (Alberta). While the Muslim community does not live in a specific residential area, "the majority, 53.1% of Canadian Muslims, were, at the time of the census, located in Ontario."⁶

Upon arrival, many Muslim immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries found themselves deprived of social structures that had encouraged the practice of Islam and the maintenance of their Islamic identity. Instead, they found a culture where religion constitutes only a small fraction of people's lives. As a result, many found the transition difficult.

One may question how a small minority group facing enormous psychosocial pressures could maintain its identity among a majority Christian group, as Christians comprise 95 percent of the Canadian population. In an address given to the first Islamic Conference in North America, Muhammad Abdel-Rauf, Director of the Islamic Center in Washington D.C., said that "[d]espite all these serious problems, Islam is spreading like a mighty torrent, sweeping through the doors of colleges and universities and even penetrating the thick walls of prisons."⁷

It may be argued that the preservation of religious belief is central to the maintenance of identity. Since the five pillars of Islam are essential to a Muslim's belief, their observation may indicate one's level of Islamic identity, at least in a quantitative manner. According to Mol, a Canadian sociologist, "religion defines man and his place in the universe."⁸ By implication, the defiance of religious practice or belief means the stepping outside of one's boundary or place and thus outside of one's identity.

Within the Canadian context, freedom is sometimes considered too permissive to practicing Muslims. In fact, Canadian society often upholds values that may pressure a Muslim to step beyond the religious boun-

⁵Baha Abu-Laban, "Foreward," in *Muslims in the Canadian Mosaic: Socio-Cultural and Economic Links with Their Countries of Origin*, ed. Zohra Husaini (Edmonton, Canada: Muslim Research Foundation, 1990), iii.

⁶A. Rashid, *Ibid.*

⁷Muhammad Abdel-Rauf, "Address," in *Proceedings of the First Islamic Conference of North America*, Newark, NJ, April 1977.

⁸Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A Sketch for a New Socio-Scientific Theory of Religion* (Agincourt, Canada: The Book Society of Canada Ltd., 1976), x.

daries crucial to his/her identity. For example, according to the Shari'ah, the consumption of alcohol, eating pork, receiving interest, and engaging in sexual promiscuity are forbidden. Yet despite these clear obligations, many Muslims in Canada and in Muslim-majority nations indulge themselves. Within the research sample of the Muslim community in the National Capital Region, some respondents reported tolerance vis-à-vis these prohibited practices. Such tolerance may threaten a Muslim's religious identity.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Canada's first Muslim immigrant family came from Kfarmishky, Lebanon, in 1903, and settled in Ottawa. Since that time, the city of Ottawa and its neighboring communities have seen a significant growth in their Muslim population. In 1979, Ottawa had an estimated five thousand Muslim residents.⁹ Today, the Ottawa Muslim Association estimates that there are between twelve to fifteen thousand Muslims living in the National Capital Region. The influx of Muslim Somali refugees over the past few years has greatly increased the above numbers. According to one Somali source, their community numbers over three thousand.

The Muslim community in the CNCR, as an institutionalized organization, was established in the basement of a church in 1973. The individuals who laid the foundation for this community came from different cultural, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, but were joined together by their common faith. Renard states that "[i]mmigrants to whom I have spoken have indicated frankly that they came to improve their economic lot, but they still desire to live as Muslims in a non-Islamic society."¹⁰

Immigration Factors

Several factors have influenced Muslim immigration to Canada, particularly during the last two decades. Respondents to the research sample of Muslims in the CNCR mention five primary factors for their decision to leave their homeland and migrate to Canada: a) educational opportunities (32.6 percent); b) political alienation from their ancestral lands (17.4 percent); c) economic advantages (14.4 percent); d) the pull of kin and friends already in Canada (13.6 percent); and e) the freedom of faith

⁹This figure was given by Dr. Hussain Choudary, president of the Ottawa Muslim Association in 1979, through unstructured interview, 14 October 1991.

¹⁰John Renard, "Understanding the World of Islam," *America*, no. 11 (1979): 208.

and expression enjoyed under Canadian law (12.1 percent). The remainder of Muslims sampled, representing 9.8 percent of the total Muslim population, were born in Canada. Interestingly enough, none of the respondents indicated the option "Canadian immigration laws are flexible" as a reason for migration. In any case, regardless of their initial motivation, Muslim immigrants have one thing in common: "to make a better life for themselves, their children and their wives."¹¹

The question of whether Muslim immigrants can or should adapt to North American's non-Islamic culture and values is one of the great issues facing the survival of the Muslim community in Canada. Several factors come into play here, such as the structures of the Islamic donor culture, the particular characteristics of the individual Muslim, and Canada's prevailing lifestyle values at the time of immigration.

Muslims in Canada face certain social and psychological problems that render their adjustment to Canadian society difficult. Some examples are their obligations to pray five times a day, fast during the month of Ramadan, to make the pilgrimage to Makkah, and to follow various dietary restrictions. All of these govern the practice of their everyday life and cultural goals, as well as their political and economic perceptions. In light of these values, which are an essential part of Islamic identity, the following question arises: Do Muslims choose to be acculturated and assimilated, or do they prefer to maintain their traditions and customs as much as possible? This study investigates whether members of the Muslim community in the Canadian National Capital Region (CNCR) are maintaining their cultures and traditions and practicing Islam as they did in their countries of origin, or whether they are losing their Islamic identity and faith through integration into Canadian society.

Methodology and Techniques

This study is a sociological inquiry into the religious identification and adaptation of Muslims living in the CNCR. It sheds light on the variations in the degree and pattern of adaptation and acculturation as well as on the social factors associated with the process of differential adjustment and resistance to change of an individual's religious identity.

Islamic identity, as explored theoretically by Mol and Erikson, is analyzed and the findings are then related to the notion of institutional

¹¹Excerpt from interview with Ms. Eva Wahab, 15 July 1991. Ms. Wahab is the first and oldest Canadian-born member of the Ottawa Muslim community. She was involved in the early stages of planning and fundraising for the construction of the Ottawa mosque.

completeness, as illustrated by Breton.¹² The analysis is based on structured field interviews via questionnaires and follow-up interviews, participant observations of the community, unstructured interviews, and comparisons with studies of other Muslim communities in North America.

Upon examining the individual's Islamic identity and his/her observance of Islamic values, the following questions arise: To what extent did Muslim immigrants follow the Shari'ah prior to immigration to Canada? Which religious and social norms were traditionally accepted in the individual's native land on the individual, family, community, and society levels? To what extent can Muslim immigrants avoid some Islamically unacceptable Canadian social norms while maintaining Islamic values not permitted within the Canadian legal system? If Muslims can deal with this situation, how long can they maintain these values and at what price is this identity maintained?

Islamic identity is assessed according to the following four factors: a) an examination of Islam (especially the five pillars) as a religion and a way of life; b) the sociological and psychological factors challenging Islamic identity in Canada; c) Breton's concept of "institutional completeness" and its ability to attract both immigrant and Canadian-born Muslims into community boundaries; and d) an analysis of the Canadian Muslim identity and its maintenance with respect to political issues specific to the donor society as well as to the larger Muslim community.

A sample of 152 respondents was chosen to statistically represent the CNCR's Muslim community (total population is approximately fifteen thousand). Subjects were either chosen by the researcher or recommended by other community members. All were Muslims aged eighteen or older. While their level of Islamic observance varies, as did their economic and educational levels, linguistic conditions, reason(s) for immigration, and ethnic backgrounds, their Islamic identity was uniquely distinctive. The researcher interviewed thirty-seven members of the research sample, while the remaining 115 subjects voluntarily provided the needed data by answering questionnaires. Two primary languages (English and Arabic) were used, while all translations were conducted solely by the author.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the Islamic identity of the group in question is composed of at least four different ingredients:

¹²Raymond Breton, "Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *The American Journal of Sociology*, no. 70 (1964): 193-205.

a) Islam as a religion, which involves a personal system of faith and belief as well as a pattern of observance; b) psychosocial influences, particularly those experienced by Muslims living in the CNCR's non-Muslim society; c) community organization, or a system of institutional completeness that provides adequate resources to meet the needs of the Muslim population living in the Ottawa area; and d) the political situation, which enables Muslims to maintain their Islamic identity in a traditional, though relative, manner.

These ingredients seem to be both interdependent and interrelated. For example, Islam as a religion forms the basis of a personal orientation which, in turn, leads a Muslim towards a sense of continuity with both the past (history) and with a local and a global community (the ummah). The individual Muslim participates in Islam through a pattern of observances, such as prayers, fasting, and/or charity. It is through this participation that he/she enters into community with others who also participate in Islam through similar patterns of observances. Community organization provides cohesion, solidarity, and self-sufficiency among Muslims sharing the same beliefs, patterns of observances, and common needs. If, however, it were not for the resources provided by the Muslim community, the Muslim individual's participation in Islam might be limited to a very personal form of worship. It is through the availability of the mosque, various educational facilities, and the Ottawa Muslim Association that the individual Muslim is provided with many opportunities for interaction with other Muslims.

The Canadian political structure has an important impact on the maintenance and formation of an Islamic identity. Muslims in Canada practice their faith to a lesser degree than they would if they were residents of an Islamic state, since Canadian society is not based upon Islamic law. Consequently, the research sample indicates that an individual's Islamic identity in a non-Islamic society, when compared to the ideal, traditional, and "absolute" identity believed by many Muslims to have existed at the time of the Prophet, is maintained in a "relative" manner.

The importance assigned to specific problems by respondents of the research sample shows how members of the Muslim community in the CNCR adapt to a non-Islamic society while maintaining their Islamic identity. For Muslims in the Ottawa area, the fear of losing their identity and faith, as well as media stereotyping of Islam and Muslims (often a product of racism and discrimination), may create additional pressures on their adaptation to Canadian society. Mixed marriages and the problem of being accepted by Canadians often accelerates a minority group's process of assimilation, theoretically contradicting Canada's multicultural policy, which states:

And whereas the government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and **religion** as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada.¹³

The social and psychological problems examined throughout this research often distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims in the CNCR. A Muslim's length of residency in the CNCR may influence how he/she views and resolves these problems. This community has established certain Islamic institutions to help its members resist outside pressures in an attempt to keep them within the community's boundaries.

Religious observance and institutional completeness interact with social and psychological factors to shape one's Islamic identity. These influences appear to have an impact on Islamic identity in four ways: a) they might cause an erosion of those attributes which differentiate Muslims from non-Muslims; b) they might reinforce those attributes that differentiate Muslims from non-Muslims (i.e., cause one to be a better Muslim); c) the process of adaptation and/or assimilation may depend on how problems are perceived and/or resolved by individuals. One may be forced to change one's outlook, or even his/her name, because of the way one perceives or fails to resolve these problems, or fails to accept them; and d) these various social and psychological influences may exert stress on the individual, thereby affecting one's sense of security and autonomy, as well as on the family and community.

When a Muslim moves to or is born in a non-Islamic society such as Canada, is it possible to maintain and/or form an Islamic identity? This study has shown that the CNCR Muslim community has been able to maintain an Islamic identity while adapting to Canadian society. Due to the confrontation between Islamic and Canadian values, which has been examined throughout the research sample of the Muslim community in the Ottawa area, one's Islamic identity has been maintained and in some cases reevaluated. Although the social and psychological factors experienced by Muslims living in the CNCR influence their Islamic identity, the Muslim community in the Ottawa area exhibits a very consistent process of adaptation to Canadian society while simultaneously maintaining its Is-

¹³"The Multiculturalism Policy of Canada," in *Multiculturalism: What Is It About?* (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 36.

lamic identity. In addition, the ways in which situations are perceived and problems are resolved, as well as the individual's formal affiliation with the CNCR Muslim community, are important factors that influence the formation of one's Islamic identity. Part of these affiliations involve the individual's interactions with different social and religious organizations, through which his/her ethnic and cultural interests are represented, preserved, and sustained.

Community organization, or a system of institutional completeness providing the resources necessary to meeting the needs of Muslims living in the Ottawa area, is essential to the maintenance of an Islamic identity. From a social and religious perspective, these institutions equip members of the Muslim community to maintain their Islamic identity by bringing Muslim individuals into contact with each other and then reinforcing their Islamic identity. With the participation of these four elements (i.e., Islam as a religion, social and psychological factors, community institutions, and the political situation), an Islamic identity definitely can be maintained in the Canadian National Capital Region.

The impact of the political structure upon the formation and maintenance of an Islamic identity in Canada is significant. According to Erikson, identity has two main components: it functions as a form of personal orientation and as a means for experiencing continuity. These two components exist in the context of the five pillars of Islam, psycho-social influences, and institutional completeness. He also says that identity:

. . . points to an individual's link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of his people. Yet [it] also relates to the cornerstone of this individual's unique development The term "identity" expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.¹⁴

A model of Islamic identity, based upon three ingredients which have an impact upon the formation and/or maintenance of Islamic identity, has been generated from this analysis. These ingredients or forces are Islam as a religion, a non-Islamic society, and community organization. Erikson's concept of identity, which provides a sense of continuity between the individual and the local community and with the larger, global Muslim community, is demonstrated by the following model:

¹⁴Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1980), 109.

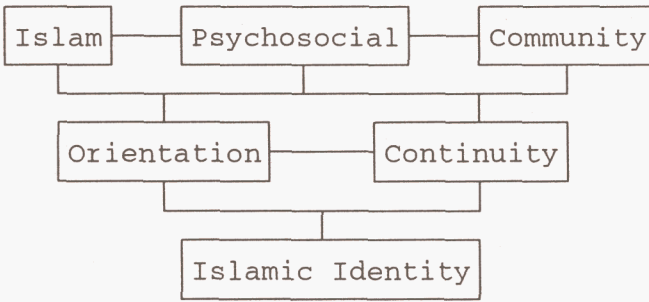


Figure 1: Islamic Identity: The Model

In summary, this study confirms the differential impact of the five pillars, psychosocial influences, community organization, and political aspects in shaping one's Islamic identity in a non-Islamic society. It demonstrates that although the CNCR's Muslim community has adopted Canadian social values, it still maintains its Islamic identity. In view of the fact that Muslims living in Ottawa have not experienced any legal discrimination with respect to their religion, they appear to enjoy considerable freedom to practice Islam and preserve what Breton calls institutional completeness.

The maintenance of an Islamic identity in Canada can be regarded as "second best" or "relative" in comparison to the more traditional or "absolute" identity believed by many Muslims to have existed during the early Islamic period. Due to the level of freedom, Canada's multicultural policy, and the separation of church and state, it is possible for Muslims to practice their religion and maintain their Islamic identity in Canada. Canadian-born Muslims as well as their immigrant parents can maintain, to different extents, their Islamic identity.

The extent to which Muslims can maintain their Islamic identity with its unique religious and ethnic characteristics and for how long is difficult to anticipate. Looking at the exceptionally small number of resident and practicing Muslims in the CNCR, it appears that their Islamic identity might have continuity over time. Perhaps further research can deal with this issue and clarify the relationship between the degree of Islamic identity an individual can maintain in Canada and the length of its survival.

Analysis of the respondents' level of religious observance and sense of Islamic identity reveals the emergence of the three following groups:

Group A: This group comprises approximately one-fifth (21 percent) of the research sample and represents those who appear to be among the community's most "committed" members. Individuals within Group A re-

port a strong sense of Islamic identity and are primarily immigrants to Canada, although Canadian-born and second-generation Muslims, converts and those possessing student visas were also identified.

Group B: This group, accounting for approximately three-quarters (73 percent) of the research sample, represents the apparently "less committed" members of the community. Individuals within Group B report a moderate sense of Islamic identity. This group attempts to adjust to Canadian social values and interprets Islamic law in a way that will make them comfortable in their search for accommodating Canadian social values. Among Group B, immigrant and second-generation Muslims, as well as converts and students, were identified.

Group C: In comparison with Group A and Group B, members of this group can be classified as the "least-committed" Muslims, since they appear to possess a low level of Islamic identity. This group, which accounts for approximately 6 percent of the research sample, is not as visible as other group members, possibly because they do not want to identify themselves with the community. Group C is also comprised of immigrant and first-generation Muslims, converts, and students. While a complete process of assimilation is expected to take place among the members of this group, the length of time may vary.

A more in-depth analysis of participant profiles and survey results, in the form of tables, charts, and figures, can be found in a forthcoming manuscript on the Muslim community in the CNCR.¹⁵

Based upon this recent study of the Muslim community in the CNCR, the following conclusions can be made:

1. As an ethnic minority group, Muslims are relatively recent immigrants to the National Capital Region of Canada. The community is formed primarily of immigrants (87 percent), while Canadian-born Muslims represent the remaining 13 percent of the sample population of 152 Muslims.
2. Like other minority groups in Canada, the Muslim community in the CNCR area faces the dilemma of assimilation/ghettoization. To maintain one's initial identity without any change or adaptation results in

¹⁵Ahmad F. Yousif, "The Maintenance of Islamic Identity in Canadian Society: Religious Observance, Psychological Influences, and Institutional Completeness of the Muslim Community in the Canadian National Capital Region." Ph.D. diss., University of Ottawa (Canada), 1992.

a ghetto situation. Conversely, to seek a complete and smooth adaptation to the host culture paves the way for assimilation. It appears that the Muslim community of Ottawa is taking the middle road.

3. An assessment of the five pillars of Islam shows that an Islamic identity is preserved primarily by "committed" Muslims (21 percent), secondarily by "less-committed" (73 percent), and barely by those individuals who are "least-committed" (6 percent). The real question remains as to whether or not the same preservation of identity will be maintained with the second, third, and other future generations of Canadian-born Muslims and, if so, for how long?
4. Upon assessment of the lifestyle and psychosocial influences on Muslims, two scenarios can be envisaged: optimistic (there are no problems that Muslims cannot solve) and pessimistic (Muslims see no problem because their insufficient attention to their Islamic practices and obligations have made them blind to the difficulties encountered by practicing Muslims in Canada). The optimistic scenario appears to be the appropriate one.
5. An assessment of institutional completeness shows that the situation is as favorable as it can be (i.e., there are functioning associations, mosques, and schools). Of course, any interpretation of the term "completeness" is relative.
6. The Canadian political situation appears to be suitable for Muslims in a limited sense, even though it is not an Islamic state, provided that they accept living in a minority situation.
7. When the Islamic bonds between the diverse Muslim nationalities begin to weaken, a phenomenon foreseen in a secularized context, the identity of the community will follow suit.
8. Since this study is a pioneer exploration, it is desirable that some of its findings be compared to other Muslim communities in North America, especially to those in Canada.
9. This sociological inquiry has shown that the Muslim community in the National Capital Region maintains its identity through the preservation of religious rituals, experiences psychosocial influences, enjoys a degree of institutional completeness, and accepts the political situation in Canada.
10. Finally, this research demonstrates that for the Muslim community in Canada and, more specifically, for the CNCR's Muslim community, the preservation of religious belief is central to the maintenance of an Islamic identity in a non-Islamic society.

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