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Book Review

The Muslim Question in Canada: A Story of Segmented Integration

Adolmohammad KAZEMIPUR. Vancouver:
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In Europe, the integration of Muslims stirs up tumultuous debates, both in the media and in academia. Several authors have detected a rejection of multicultural policies, which would coincide with a growing rejection of Muslim immigration (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009; Kalin 2011; Koopmans 2013). The recent terrorist attacks in Paris, London, and Manchester have worsened the situation in the Old World, where identity tensions seem to be increasing.

Is Canada escaping this trend? The country did not experience any kind of demonstration of Muslim anger or terrorist activities comparable to the 9/11 terrorist attack or the 2005 London bombings. Therefore, is there “Canadian exceptionalism,” that is to say, better integration of Muslims in Canada, which could be explained by the country’s geographical location, its political institutions, or its historical expertise regarding ethnic and religious diversity? That is the question Abdolmohammad Kazemipur strives to answer in his book *The Muslim Question in Canada. A story of segmented integration*, published by UBC Press. The author analyses the idea of “Muslim exceptionalism” that can be defined as “a perceived fundamental difference between Muslims and other immigrants with regard to their interaction with host societies” (p. 5). This “Muslim question” arises in various Western democracies, and is also present in Canada under certain aspects.

In a first contextual part (Chapters 2 and 3), the author provides a brief historical overview of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. He emphasizes

the diversity of historical contexts and geographical areas involved: the expansion of the Caliphate from the beginning of the Muslim era to the Crusades, Turkish pressure in the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, and the colonial experiences of the nineteenth century show a great variety of situations. Therefore, speaking of an encounter between “Islam” and “the West” as if those concepts were monolithic obscures the historical and sociological contexts of these events. Kazemipur discusses the literature on integration of Muslims in Western democracies, and offers a relevant classification based on different social domains (cultural, political, economic). The theoretical relations between majority and minority are examined with regard to assimilation (celebrated by Huntington in his book *Who are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*), and the politics of recognition, based notably on the writings of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka. The author then turns to current literature to see how intellectuals have addressed the question of the lives of Muslims in non-Muslim majority environments. He mentions the positions of Muslim activists who have rejected Islam, such as Irshad Manji and Ayaan Ali Irsi. For devout Muslims, the issue of adapting the *fiqh* (jurisprudence of Muslim minorities) is of paramount importance, and the author shows how the new situation of Muslim immigrants as a minority in Western countries leads to a theological reshaping of the daily practice of Islam.

In Chapter 4, the author provides a relevant critique of this literature. As he says, “these responses [to the issue of integration of Muslims] vary greatly in terms of their ability to adequately explain the problem and in their capacity to offer any tangible solutions” (p. 55). Indeed, the theological content of a faith determines only very partially the social behaviour of a believer. Taking distance from cultural essentialization of identities, the author insists that the integration process is based mainly on the quality of social interactions between immigrants and the majority population. From this point of view, Chapter 5 provides crucial data about the sense of attachment of Muslims in Canada and its evolution over time. Building on surveys, official statistics and interviews he has conducted, the author argues that attachment to Canada and Islam is not a zero-sum game, and that belonging to Canada is reinforced by belonging to an ethnic group.

The third part of the book, which includes Chapters 6 and 7, focuses on the lives of Canadian Muslims, and paints a mixed portrait of their situation. The author addresses the complex (and often misunderstood) relationship of Muslims with Islam, the orientalist vision of Muslim women and the portrayal of Muslims in the media. We note the complex relationship that Muslim women have with the veil, interpreted as being both a communitarian and an individualistic symbol. Here the author’s analysis meets the work of other scholars such as Jocelyne Cesari, Nilüfer Göle and Azizah Al Hibri. As for the media, there is, according to the author, the construction of a “grand narrative” in many Western countries, in which Muslims are often regarded as the other “against which the nation-building project is carried out” (p. 90). Based on these observations, Chapter 7 looks more closely

at the idea of “Canadian exceptionalism,” stressing that with the episodes of the “Sharia debate” in Ontario and the Héraultville affair in Québec, Canada is not completely exempt from controversy concerning Islam. Despite these downsides, the author provides a set of empirical data showing great satisfaction among Muslims in Canada, comparable to that of non-Muslims. For example, more than three quarters of Canadian Muslims believe that only a small number of Canadians have a negative view of Islam.

The last part of the book, which includes three chapters, is perhaps the most successful. In Chapter 8, the author looks at key issues: the degree of economic integration of Muslims compared with other immigrants and native-born Canadians, through their experiences at work, income and poverty rates. Generally, Muslims have different experiences than other members of religious communities. Economic integration is below the national average, which cannot be explained in terms of education or language skills. The next chapter deals with the sensitive issue of trust between Muslims and other Canadians. This part of the study, which contains interesting findings concerning relationships between communities in Canada and attachment to Canada, should have been developed further.

Reading this book inspires several reflections. In comparison with Europe, one could argue that there is, to some extent, “Canadian exceptionalism” since, in many ways, integration of Canadian Muslims proves to be better than in other Western democracies. However, one might wonder to what extent this is due to Canadian institutions or rather to a much more selective immigration process?

Finally, this book is essential for anyone who is interested in contemporary debates about Islam. Its originality is twofold. First, it adds to the debate a significant amount of empirical data based on various sources, such as official statistics, surveys and interviews. Second, the book introduces a new methodological perspective by downplaying the cultural variable when analyzing the question of Muslims in Canada and in the West. Indeed, the issue of Islamic teachings and content of the Muslim faith has too often been the focus of researchers’ attention; their eyes should instead be on socioeconomic variables. As the author says, “we should shift our attention from the theological to the social” (p. 180). This approach is relevant, and brings a very innovative approach to a body of literature that is too often theoretical or normative.

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