



Islam in Canada¹

Jennifer A. SELBY, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Muslim communities have lived in Canada for centuries, long before its Dominion. Scholarship about their lives is far more recent. This short overview maps the history of Muslim life in Canada alongside the scholarship published to date. A review of the academic literature published on Muslims in Canada since the 1990s shows that academic interest in Muslim lives in Canada expanded exponentially by the end of the first decade of the 2000s (see Selby, Barras and Adrian, forthcoming).

Much of the scholarship to date cites sources by Daood Hamdani (1997; 1999; 2014; 2015) on the history of Muslim life in Canada. Little archival-based work exists. The limited historical record focuses on the arrival of Middle Eastern migrants – particularly from what is now Lebanon – and their community and infrastructure building in the Edmonton, Alberta region. Canada's first official mosque, the Al-Rashid, was inaugurated in Edmonton in 1938 (Waugh 2018). It is likely that Black Muslims in Atlantic Canada settled prior to the Lebanese community in Alberta and that some of these Muslims arrived as slaves (Cooper 2006; 2007), but few scholarly works include this possibility. In Alberta, most early Muslims were men with little formal education and English-language fluency, who worked as labourers, shopkeepers, and peddlers (Eid 2007). Given the challenges of the census and the known “whitening” of immigrants by Canadian immigration officials in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslim communities are difficult to count. An amateur historian of the early Edmontonian community has discovered several of these name changes; Mohammed Khalil Ali Nogedi, for instance, became “Bud Alley” (Awid 2010, 45, 55).

These sources make evident that more research is needed regarding Muslim life in these centuries. Statistical data confirm an increase in the Muslim Canadian population following changes post-WWII to the country's immigration policies. With growing awareness of its complicity in discriminatory policies, the country moved away from its previous White Protestant British ideal citizen (Kelly 1998). Between 1947 and 1965, therefore, a more diverse group of Muslim immigrants settled. The new merit-point system in 1967 meant that the Muslim population diversified and included Lebanese and Syrians, as well as Indonesians, Moroccans, Palestinians, Egyptians, Iraqis and Indo-Pakistanis (McDonough 2000, 173), of whom many were professionals who came to large cities to improve their economic opportunities and others sought to escape political upheaval.

¹ Source: Material for this post are drawn from Chapter Two of *Beyond Accommodation: Everyday Narratives of Muslim Canadians* (Selby, Barras and Beaman 2018).

Significantly, the category “Muslim” was listed in the long form Canada Census only in 1981, when Muslims numbered approximately 100,000, a substantial leap from a decade earlier, and mostly centered in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec and Alberta (Abu-Laban 1983, 79). Increased immigration and greater diversity in the backgrounds of Canadian Muslims in the 1980s were also bolstered by a then-new federal government policy of multiculturalism. Scholarship and political attention also shifted in this decade. If in the 1960s and 1970s racialized immigrant communities in Canada were studied through the lenses of race and ethnicity, the Iranian Revolution (and later, 9/11) accorded attention to these same individuals’ expressions of Islam. Steady population growth has translated into greater institutionalization within Muslim communities with the establishment of organizations in the 1990s. Hussain and Scott (2012) count more than 250 Islamic organizations in the Greater Toronto Area alone. One notable example is the volunteer-based Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW).

A 130% population increase between 1991 and 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001) further diversified the Muslim Canadian population. By the 2000s, the majority of Muslim Canadians – like most of Canada’s immigrant population – lived in the Greater Toronto Area. There are also significant Muslim populations in the provinces of Quebec, notably in Montreal (6% of the city’s population) and in Alberta, in its larger cities of Calgary and Edmonton. In the most recent available data, there were 1,053,945 Muslims in Canada (Statistics Canada 2013); they represent the most ethnically diverse religious minority. The largest Muslim ethnic group is South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and, through migration, East African), but there are also significant populations from the Middle East and North Africa, and more recently, from Somalia, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Hussein 2004, 361).

Most Muslim Canadians are Sunni, but other groups include Shias and Ahmadiyyas. The Canadian Muslim population includes converts (Mossière 2012), whose number is difficult to calculate given how conversion is often private (i.e. not subject to the involvement of religious authorities) and due to the high numbers of Muslims who are “unmosqued” (Flower and Birkett 2014, 3). The number of self-identified Muslims in Canada is expected to triple to nearly 2.7 million by 2030, which would constitute 6.6% of Canada’s total population (PEW Research Centre 2011).

With the exception of the Canadian Broadcast Corporation’s widely syndicated “Little Mosque on the Prairie” (examined by Khan 2009; Dakroury 2012; Anderson and Greifenhagen 2013), fewer scholars have examined Islam and popular culture in Canada. One notable response to pejorative media stories has been the recent counter-narrative involvement of Canadian Muslim youth on social media (see Funk 2017; Selby and Funk 2020).

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