

The Muslim Question in Canada: A Story of Segmented Integration

Abdalmohammad Kazemipur

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Considering that in the 2015 Federal Election, candidates were often talking about Muslims and their relationship to Canada, whether from an empathetic and supportive position or from a negative and racist position, Kazemipur's book could not be more welcome and timely. While many of us in the Muslim community wish we were not part of a "question" that needed debating and discussing, Kazemipur's title is, regrettably, very consciously and aptly chosen, for it refers back to the debates in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century about the "Jewish Question." The author notes, as others have, that contemporary debates about "illiberal Muslims" with strange customs who cannot and will not "integrate" into Canadian society mirror those about Jews in that era (pp. 7-8), and proposes to study this particular community through a much needed sociological lens. The book is very well-written, accessible, methodologically and theoretically sophisticated, and enormously useful – anyone who wants to talk about the Muslim experience in Canada will find it insightful and indispensable for coming to terms with day-to-day realities of those experiences.

Kazemipur rightly points out that this "Muslim" question is not fruitfully approached through the paradigm proposed by Samuel Huntington and like-minded scholars, namely, "culture," which forms the basis of a "Muslim exceptionalism" (p. 5) and explains the "inability" of Muslims to integrate into western democracies. This approach, he argues, "grossly oversimplifies a

complex and multifaceted problem” and “removes the possibility that the mainstream population might have to take some moral responsibility for it” (p. 5). Integration is a relationship among different peoples. Thus he also points out, although not until the end of the book, that trying to understand these Muslims’ situation by focusing upon Islamic theology is less useful than employing the sociological approach.

...the Muslim question [in Canada] is a product not of the teachings of Islam or of the fundamental beliefs of Muslims but, rather, of the particular set of relationships between Muslims and others. The major implication of this finding is that we should shift our attention from the theological to the social. In other words, we should focus on bringing the social into current debates about Muslims, which, to this point, have centred on the theological. While related, the debate about Islam and the debate about Muslims are distinct, and neither should be reduced to the other. (p. 180)

What this means, although he does not say this himself, is that we do not need to look into Islamic theological teachings (although this is part of it) to understand why young Muslim Canadians join ISIS, but rather, at the sociological-empirical details of their lives in Canada.

The Muslim Question in Canada, which contains an introduction explaining why the author is conducting this investigation, and a conclusion with final remarks containing implications for policy and suggestions for further research, is divided into four parts:

- Part One: Context. Chapters 1 and 2 give a broad statistical overview of Muslims in Canada, the history of their arrival, ethnic and sectarian dimensions, and various responses to how they were received.
- Part Two: Conceptual Framework. In chapters 3 and 4, Kazemipur outlines his sociological approach, which draws on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (d. 2002), especially the concepts of “field” (integration as a case of what is the problem, where is it a problem, and who is the change agent), identity as fluctuating instead of fixed, and in a context of flexible but shaping structures; and “habitus” (shaping structures that have affected Muslim immigrants and give contour to their Canadian environment when they arrive and try to settle).
- Part Three: Muslims in Canada: Front Stage. Chapters 5 and 6 covers ethnic and cultural diversity; the relationship between Islam and Muslims, the role of women, media discourses about Muslims; and attachment to Canada and non-Muslim perceptions of Muslims.

- Part Four: Muslims in Canada: Back Stage. Chapters 7-9 look at employment, social interaction, settlement patterns, discrimination, and using statistics to propose ways to increase Muslims' attachment to Canada.

The full force of these chapters, and what makes the book so important and useful, is the combined quantitative-qualitative method used by the author. This represents a break from the norm: debating the "Muslim" question on the basis of conjecture instead of empirical data. Kazemipur plumbs quantitative data from Statistics Canada's nationwide surveys, such as the General Social Surveys, the Ethnic Diversity Survey, the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, the Canadian Census, and from Environics' 2006 nation-wide survey of Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians (p. 15) and taps into in-depth interviews with twelve Muslim immigrants. From this data, he has presented a story that is both dismaying and encouraging, a narrative picture that allows us to note with certainty that Muslims have a high level of attachment to Canada (p. 98). However, according to him, this attachment is being chipped away at by negative experiences (108-9). For example, out of all of the country's faith groups, Muslims have the highest poverty rate (p. 121) and the hardest time finding work (p. 133), but not because of their education levels or language skills (134-41), and that employment prospects are linked to the Muslims' perceived level of satisfaction with being in Canada and their future (pp. 160-61).

So, while Canada's multiculturalist policies are more successful in integrating immigrants that has been the case in various European democracies, Kazemipur finds that there is a "Muslim exceptionalism" in Canada: Other things being equal, Muslims are being less well received than other immigrants (p. 107). Concluding that the main issue of attachment is connected to employment and that the underlying reasons for that lie in the social realm, he proposes increased contact between Muslims and non-Muslims through non-segregated neighborhoods, as well as at schools and universities, and a more diverse interaction between "host" families and newly arrived immigrants (pp. 181-84).

There are, however, several minor quibbles that detract from Kazemipur's book. First, he laudably proposes investigating the "Muslim Question" from a theoretical-empirical sociological perspective. He notes that he will consider this methodologically in four societal domains: the institutional, the media, the economic, and the social (p. 10). Using his combined quantitative-qualitative method, he does full justice to the latter two domains. But in terms of the first two, he concludes, rather startlingly, that Muslims face "few to

no major problems ... In other words, with some exceptions, there are no major biases against Muslims in the mandates and structures of Canadian public institutions or in the contents of the Canadian media” (p. 181).

Aware of how long it can take for a submitted manuscript to be published, nevertheless the Federal Conservative Government’s policy to ban the niqab at a citizenship ceremony was introduced in 2011. Was the author unaware of this? Institutional racism at the highest level has certainly been part of this “question,” at least under former Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-15) of the Conservative Party of Canada. In fact, many Muslims were actually thinking of leaving Canada if he were re-elected. In addition, critical discourse analysis has revealed racism in the Canadian press against Aboriginals, Muslims, and visible minorities for at least thirty years – briefly referred to (pp. 90-91), but somehow overlooked in his conclusions. Perhaps relying on quantitative surveys was not the best data for exploring this area.

Finally, and probably more importantly, I became quite uneasy as the book progressed with the placing of Kazemipur’s analysis of Canadian Muslims as a sub-domain of immigration studies. To be sure this is a standard approach, as it is to consider Canada as a “host” society, as if Muslims were simply “guests” here, but I found that even as Kazemipur’s analysis is original and miles ahead of most studies, eventually this became a hampering paradigm that led to some odd statements here and there.

Muslims originally came as immigrants, as did all non-Aboriginal peoples. But those who immigrated in the early twentieth century are now into their third and fourth generations; those arriving post-1960 are now into second and third generations. These Muslims are “native-born,” but Kazemipur classes them as “second-generation immigrants” (p. 4). It is not possible to be a “second-generation” *immigrant*, for these are the “native-born.” This classification ends up skewing the interpretation of some of the data, and so in the final analysis, even if ever so slightly, makes the book about the problems of the “Muslim question” slightly off. For instance, on p. 123, he discusses the poverty rate of “second generation immigrant” Muslims (“those born inside Canada”), noting that it should be lower than that of the first generation; however, even with familiarity with the language, culture, and education, poverty is 30-55 percent, much higher than the national average. We wait for him to name “racism” or “Islamophobia” for this phenomenon, but putting the second generation into the category of “immigrant” keeps the analysis away from these concepts, even though he alludes to them a few times.

All of the data around the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians suffers from this distinction, since he talks about Muslims as im-

migrants versus “native-born” Canadians. In terms of neighborhood interaction and how segregation may or may not be contributing to negative perceptions of Muslims and weakening the latter’s attachment to Canada among Muslims, we are presented with a series of tables showing immigrants sharing neighbourhoods with the “native-born.” These are meant to demonstrate the consequences of integration because “[a]bout 35 percent of native-born Canadians seem to have had no contact with any Muslims” (pp. 148-49). Kazemipur seems to consider native-born Canadians as “white” and the others as “non-Canadians,” in which case his analysis would be better placed within critical race theory, which does not hesitate to analyze the concepts of whiteness and race hierarchy and their contribution to excluding Muslims.

I am aware that many Muslim Canadians have raised their children by talking about “us Muslims” and “them’ Canadians,” and I am aware of the lack of great alternatives to the words “Muslims” and “Westerners.” But if we are ever to move beyond this “Muslim Question,” the ideas so eloquently challenged in Kazemipur’s book about the supposed “illiberality” of Muslims and their inability to integrate into western democracies, his searching in the economic and social realms of exclusion, we must also take the final step of regarding Muslims as Canadians and not viewing them only through the lenses of immigration, and thus eternal outsiders.

Katherine Bullock
Lecturer, Department of Political Science
University of Toronto at Mississauga, ON, Canada