

Canada's Muslims



*An unnoticed part of our History
An address on the occasion of Eid-al-Adha
at the Parliament Building, Ottawa, May 2, 1996*

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The Honourable Senators and Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies and Fellow Canadians: Canada has attracted immigrants throughout its history. Over the years, they have come to escape racial or ideological intolerance, flee religious and political persecution, run away from famines and above all, to seek a better living in the country rated the best in the world by the United Nations. The desire to make it in the new country, hard work and enterprise were not their only characteristics. They also brought their distinct customs and traditions, arts and cultures and their beliefs and faiths.

The Canadian society has evolved through the intermingling of these numerous groups and cross-fertilization of their heritages. In the process of adapting to the Canadian society, the immigrants also change it. And all, established citizens and newcomers alike, adjust to this dynamic process. The adjustment gives the society vibrancy, broadens its horizons and augments the choices available to its members. Since culture is made up of the contribution of those adjusting to it, one can denigrate particular elements only at the cost of impoverishing the culture as a whole.

Changing Religious Affiliation

The growing cultural richness and ethnic diversity of the population in combination with the post-1960s liberalism influenced the religious spectrum of the

country. Consequently, three significant patterns emerged over the last two decades. First, secularism is on the rise. Many young people, disenchanted with their forefathers' faith, are seeking fulfillment in other denominations or leaving the established religion altogether. They believe in God but do not affiliate themselves with any institutionalized, ritualistic religion. The number of such people nearly doubled to 3.4 million between 1981 and 1991. Second, partly as a result of the increasing secularism, the Christian population is growing slower than the total population.

Third, Islam is the fastest growing religion. The 1991 census counted 253,000 Canadians reporting affiliation with Islam, compared with 98,000 in 1981 and an estimated 33,000 in 1971. They already make up the largest non-Christian community in ten out of the twenty-five metropolitan cities and in the province of Alberta. By the end of the decade, Islam will be the second principal religion in the country if the present demographic trends continue. Muslims have settled wherever the opportunity presented itself, from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast, in all the ten provinces and the two territories. Notwithstanding the dispersion, 86 per cent of the Muslims live in only six metropolitan areas and Metropolitan Toronto has more Muslims than all the provinces and territories excluding Ontario. Two-thirds are settled within 350 miles of each other.

Although very small relative to the country's total population— 0.9 per cent— they are a microcosm of the Canadian society, rich in cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. They include people from all the continents, from China and the Philippines to the Balkans, Ukraine, Western and Eastern Europe and South America. The Canadian-born Muslims, barely visible a decade ago, have emerged as a force that will influence the development and orientation of Muslim institutions in the country. The resurgence of Islam among the young Muslims and its growing acceptance by non-Muslims at a time when young people are abandoning their forefathers' religion is one of the most significant phenomena of the Canadian religious history.

Pioneers

Islam and Muslims are not new to Canada. The documented history of Muslims in Canada dates from the mid-19th century. Thirteen years before the Fathers of Confederation created Canada, a teenaged bride of Scottish origin, Agnes Love, gave birth to the first Muslim born in the territory that was to become Canada: James Love, named after his father, was born in Ontario in 1854. He was the eldest of the eight children of James and Agnes Love. The youngest one, Alexander, was born in 1868, one year after the Canadian confederation was formed. Another couple, John and Martha Simon, described as "Mahometans" in government documents circa 1871, migrated from the United States and settled in Ontario. Like James and Agnes Love, they were of West European origins: John was English and Martha French.

Early Settlers

Unlike the pioneers who settled in Ontario, the early settlers made their home in the western provinces. They were adventurers and frontiersmen. The spirit to explore uncharted territories, expectations of being a part of the momentous events in Canadian history, and the desire to share in the riches of the new land were the hallmarks of the early settlers. Thus we hear the story of the teenager Ali Abouchadi (better known as Alexander Hamilton) who walked 50 kilometres with his uncle from Lala to Beirut in Lebanon, to board the boat to Montreal on his way to claim a share of the Klondike gold. He was too late to make a fortune in gold mining but his entrepreneurship led to other successful business ventures. More Muslims came to work on the construction of the railway linking the west with the

central provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Still others arrived in the first decade of this century to open up Alberta and

Saskatchewan for settlement.

As the pioneering days ended and the romance of adventure diminished, serious efforts got under way to reconstruct the post-War economy. Muslims arriving during this period, unlike their predecessors, were typically skilled workers and professionals who were brought to change the structure of the economy, from one that was geared to fighting the War to one that would serve the needs of the people. Further, inauguration of Islamic studies at McGill University in 1952 and a decade later at the University of Toronto attracted Muslim scholars and students from abroad. Bilingualism and multiculturalism also played a role. However, the immigration policy remained restrictive because of the continued immigration quotas.

The final phase of the Muslim migration to Canada was marked by the influx of teachers, technocrats and later entrepreneurs. It began in the mid-1960s, with the replacement of immigration quotas on Asians and Africans by a more objective selection criterion based on education and skills. Subsequently, many Muslims, most in the prime working age group, were admitted into the country to meet the growing needs of an expanding economy. As the spouses of these immigrants, who were typically young, joined them a few years later, the Muslims had a baby boom of their own.

Entrepreneurs

The economic life of the Muslim community has been significantly influenced by the immigration policy because of its emphasis, over much of the period, on bringing in skilled and professional labour. However, the entrepreneurship was not lacking. In the early history, we find fur traders and merchants who specialized in providing on-site service, a concept which, a century later, has captured the imagination of business strategists and around which fortunes have been made. The present generation of Muslim businessmen is also making its mark as entrepreneurs and good corporate citizens. In 1993, a Muslim was among the ten persons in Canadian business community selected for the prestigious Excellence in Business Award.

Knowledge-intensive Workforce The vast majority of

Muslims rely on employment to earn their livelihood. Two of their characteristics are worthy of note. First, they are economic migrants, educated and skilled who add to the country's stock of knowledge, convert knowledge into ideas (patents) and into new expressions of old ideas (copyrights), and help create jobs. Twenty-seven per cent of the Muslims in the prime labour force, age group 25 to 44 years, have one or more university degrees, a proportion much higher than the 17 per cent for the population as a whole.

Second, the motive of their migration to Canada, i.e., to improve their economic well-being and lead a fulfilling life, is reinforced by their beliefs. Every day, five times a day, when Muslims are called to prayers they are also called towards *falah*, i.e., to achieve well being and the good. And *falah* is not merely the indulgence of private sanctity but it is also the true state of well-being and proper prosperity fulfilled and realized in social life.

The demographics and work ethics of the Muslim labour force have very significant implications for the cost and funding of the country's social security system, a topic high on the public policy debate these days. Proportionally, they withdraw much less from the system and contribute much more to it than the Canadian population as a whole. Muslim families derive only 4 per cent of their total income from social security programs – old age pensions, unemployment insurance benefits, family allowances, welfare payments, etc. By comparison, this percentage for all families in Canada is 7 per cent. The comparisons are more striking with respect to the financing of the social safety net: while there are only five people working to support one in retirement in the country, among Muslims there are 15 workers to support each retiree.

Numbers do not fully convey their economic contribution. Muslims participated in almost every major event in the economic history of Canada. They hewed rocks, laid tracks and struck nails to build the Canadian Pacific railway in the late 19th century, an event dubbed the "national dream" because of its importance. Muslim farmers were among the pioneers who opened up Alberta and Saskatchewan for cultivation and settlement in the beginning of the 20th century. Skilled and professional Muslim immigrants kept up the tempo of economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. Muslim educators responded to the need for teachers and professors as the baby boom of the post-Second

World War period rolled into grade schools and then graduate schools, thus strengthening the foundation for a secure and prosperous economic future for the country.

Quest for Identity

Adjustment to any new environment is difficult. The ties of the old world pull hard while there is a strong desire to succeed in the new world. New settlers have to strive for acceptance by the host society while at the same time trying to blend the new experience with their heritage. The quest for cohesiveness as a community within the Canadian society has gone through three distinct phases. The first phase was inward looking, a product of the hesitation of the host society to welcome the newcomers and the new settlers' yearning for the old world. Local ethnic and cultural associations provided the focal point in this era. A common religious affiliation was welcome but not essential. These ethnic associations subsequently gave way to religious groups who met to perform basic religious obligations. The uncertainties, self doubts and social solecism, so pervasive in the early phases of the settlement of a new community, lingered on for a long time. Nearly a century passed before the Muslims gave public expression to their presence and identity. An affirmation of the human ability to persist and endure, a testament to the fervency of the faith of the Muslims of Edmonton, the first public announcement of the presence of the community of believers in Islam in Canada, and the first public expression that they had laid their roots in the new land, Al-Rashid mosque the first in North America – opened its doors on December 12, 1938. With the mayor of Edmonton in attendance and a Christian as the master of ceremonies, Abdullah Yusuf Ali – the most famous English translator of the Qur'an -- performed the dedication ceremony. Physically removed from its original site, it now serves as a museum of Islamic artifacts.

While the planning and fund-raising for the mosque served as a focal point, the facilities it provided upon completion shaped the community, giving it cohesiveness and some external recognition. While the world outside still appeared new and strange, the world inside was familiar, reminiscent of the old world they had left behind -- with the same language and culture and common traditions and provided some reassurance. The experience of this first mosque was typical of the mosques that followed.

So significant was the role of the mosque in facilitating the transition in the formative phase of the community that Muslims did not hesitate to help in the construction of the places of worship of the other faiths. History books record that the church located on the East First Avenue in Vancouver, bearing in its stained glass windows the heraldic arms of the ancient Croatian state, was built with the financial help of the Muslims. Their respect for all places of worship is evident in the pattern of the growth of their own institutions. In the early days, they purchased church buildings and parish halls and renovated them to use as mosques. When mosques were built using Islamic architecture, the nearness to other faiths' places of worship seemed to be a preferred location. Thus, in Toronto Jami Masjid is in a converted church building, and the Jaafri Islamic Centre – a beautiful specimen of Islamic architecture – stands between a temple and a synagogue.

In the 1980s, a new era began to set in. The sense of a familiarity and comfort, provided by a common language and culture when the community was small, began to erode. Languages and traditions became diverse. Islam was no longer primarily the religion of immigrants from Asia and Africa. The second and third generations of Muslim Canadians and those Canadians who had turned to Islam to seek meaning and fulfilment in their lives were becoming a significant force. Above all, Canadian-born children did not understand their immigrant parents' language. At the same time, the society was changing too fast. Social and technological changes challenged established lifestyles, institutions and traditions. They were either against Muslims' beliefs or too difficult to comprehend in a short time. And yet, in some respects, the society was not changing fast enough. In spite of the fact that Muslims had been a part of the Canadian religious spectrum for more than a century, the following of Islam was growing faster than any other religion in the country and the visible symbols of Muslim identity had been a permanent feature of the Canadian landscape. For decades Islam was little known and even less understood outside the universities offering courses in Islamic studies.

At the time the first mosque was built, the hopes and aspirations were simple. Subsequently, the growing social and religious needs meant that the search for identity required a broader base. From self-preservation in the early years manifest in the

formation of local community associations to identity revolving around the mosque, Muslims are finally seeking to establish themselves as a cohesive community. The community is only beginning to advance as an entity in the country's educational, social and political institutions. Just fifteen years ago, it was not easy for Muslims to find an elected representative to come to their functions. Today, thanks to the Honourable Dan McTeague, we are able to exchange information and ideas with so many of you in the hallow halls of this great institution where you guide the destiny of the country our ancestors helped build and cherished, the country of our choice and the country we love.

Note:

This address draws heavily on Daood Hassan Hamdani, "Muslims and Islam in Canada" forthcoming in Ali Kettani and M. M'Bow (eds.), *Muslims and Islam in the American Continent*, Vol.1 of the *Encyclopedia of Muslim Minorities in the World*, and "Unemployment among Muslim Canadians" in Syed Z. Abedin and Ziauddin Sardar (eds.), *Muslim Minorities in the West* (London, England).

About the Speaker

Daood Hassan Hamdani is a pioneer writer on the evolution of Canada's Muslim community. His writings cover a wide range of topics and have appeared in scholarly journals. He is the author of the highly

acclaimed Canadian chapter in the Encyclopedia of Muslim Minorities, and his writings are quoted in scholarly papers and doctoral dissertations. His paper on the concept of land, presented at an international conference on Islamic architecture and urbanism, was among the few abstracted in *Ektistics* because of their policy significance. He is a frequent speaker at international conferences.

An economist by profession, he has published articles in professional economics journals. One of his papers, originally published in English in The Netherlands, was translated into Portuguese by the government of Brazil and published in the Ministry of Finance's magazine *Financas Publicas*. His views are sought by large investment houses in their dealings with clients in Muslim countries.