

Some Reflections on the Muslim Experience in Canada

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Hardly any religion today provokes as much controversy as Islam; indeed it could be argued that it has single-handedly brought religion back to the front pages of the media, the very pages from which secularists had long argued for abandoning it altogether. If we reflect on the Muslim presence and its impact, it is important to note that the shift has occurred in Canada within the confines of less than one hundred years—a singular achievement. For all this media attention, however, believers tell us that their traditions are still largely misunderstood and maligned.

This issue hopes to spur reflections on the Canadian experience by Muslims through sketches about three topics of widespread interest: the founding community of Canada's oldest mosque, al-Rashid, within the context of Islamic development in the capital city of Alberta, Edmonton; a personal expression on hijab-wearing by a dedicated and celebrated Muslim woman, Soraya Zaki Hafez; and an exploration of surely one of the greatest controversies in the religion's short history in Canada—Ontario's brief engagement with alternative dispute resolution for Shari'a-based groups. Two further papers move in important new directions...one by Waugh on the ummah's international influence on health understanding among Muslim women, and one by Kasamali on Representations of Islam. Canada today has an intimate concern with all three of these areas of development—so much so that aspects of these topics have influenced public opinion in Canada around Islam in crucial ways.

Our hope is that these studies will encourage a much closer look by scholars at what is occurring on the ground in Canada, and indeed in all countries, rather than allowing the discourse to be shaped totally by a media bent on negative publicity. Syria and the Middle East generally provide enough daily fare from that quarter; what we need are more nuanced perspectives.

The writers here are quite aware of the preliminary results expressed, yet we hope these articles will inspire in-depth examinations of the tradition as it grows and develops in other parts of the nation and indeed, the world today.

The tradition is distinctively shaping itself around national discourses in our time and it is no longer sufficient to speak of Muslims as if they are one kind of group. We hope scholarship will move to address this new dimension of Religious Studies today.