

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Muslims in Western Societies

“There is no ‘Islam’ and there is no ‘West’,” boldly proclaimed the program of the Trudeau Foundation’s conference held in Vancouver, BC, Canada on 16-18 November 2006. Rather, the premise was that there are numerous Islams (religious, political, and geographical) and many Wests. Given this context, some 160 scholars, activists, and policymakers came together under the more general heading of “Muslims in Western Societies” to discuss, debate, and make sense of the complex interactions among and manifestations of these many Islams and many Wests.

The event was organized around five themes: “Religious Belief, Secularism, and the State”; “Immigrant Societies, Cultural Memory, and Cultural Change”; “The Multicultural Challenge”; “Muslim Women in Western Societies”; and “Muslims, Political Violence, and the Security Establishment.” Plenary sessions were held on each theme. In addition, because it was a working conference, attendees participated in discussion groups organized around these same themes and presented summary accounts of their two-day deliberations in a closing plenary.

Perhaps because of the Canadian setting, multiculturalism was one of the concepts that received much attention and served as a touchstone during many of the weekend’s discussions. During the panel on the challenge of multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka (Queen’s University) outlined the history of multiculturalism in Canada and argued that in order to accommodate the current concerns of Muslims and other religious minorities, Canada must update its multiculturalism policy. In the early 1970s, Canada officially became “multicultural” at the behest of Ukrainian Canadians who wanted to protect their language and culture within the framework of official biculturalism and bilingualism policies. In the 1980s, the logic of anti-racism entered multicultural debates, and now, Kymlicka insisted, religion has arisen as a cultural element in need of protection. He urged that we update, rather than abandon, Canada’s multicultural policy.

In “Muslims, Political Violence, and the Security Establishment” (and in the working group on the same topic, in which I participated), Rex Brynen

(McGill University) argued the multiculturalism may, in fact, be Canada's best security and counterterrorism technology. Educate Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) personnel, establish links with Muslim communities, show tolerance, gain their trust, he stated, and they will begin to police themselves. In "Religious Belief, Secularism, and the State," Daniel Weinstock (University of Montreal) discussed the place of "minorities" in the public sphere and in public institutions. When Muslim students organize extracurricular clubs or request prayer rooms, he argued, far from being indicators of ghettoization these are requests to be able to take part in – rather than to withdraw from – the public education system. We should welcome such activities, he asserted.

Given this variety of endorsements of multiculturalism, during the question-and-answer periods, panelists as well as audience members grappled with various questions: What is multiculturalism? Is it cosmetic or functional? Is it an ideal that we aspire to but never quite accomplish in practice? Is a lofty ideal enough? If multiculturalism can be functional, how can we operationalize it not only as a strategy of official tolerance but also as an anti-oppressive tool? In other words, can multiculturalism be used, for example, not only to accommodate Muslims as regards their religious beliefs but also to help un-think and undo the structural racism that they may also face?

A related topic that received a good deal of coverage was the question of the state and its function in relation to religion and religious "minorities." This interested me particularly, as a Canadian historian focused on the practices of governing and state formation. Rajeev Bhargava (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi) provided the most explicit analysis of the relationship between Muslims and the secular state. "What kind of secular state would Muslims accept?" he asked. Bhargava claimed that the liberal democratic state form can accommodate (religious) diversity and should be endorsed. However, in order to be accommodating it must be modified, according to him, as follows: Muslims would accept liberal democratic states if the state and religion were not mutually exclusive and if religion did not have to be a merely private matter.

Furthermore, he noted one problem with the liberal democratic state form: while liberty and equality are protected, the bearer of this protection is the individual, not the community. What Bhargava seemed to be suggesting is that in order for Muslims in the West to accept the state forms within which they live, the state should see religion as a legitimate mode of governing communities and should protect this liberty of communal religious governance. There was certainly diversity around the table on this topic. For example, in the same panel Linda Clarke (Concordia University) argued

vehemently that religion should in no way be an object of government policy. With regard to Canada specifically, she asserted that the Canadian government could not possibly have a policy toward Islam because, she said, “you cannot treat something that you do not know.”

In his welcoming address at the outset of the conference, Trudeau Foundation president Pierre-Gerlier Forest had pointed out that *confer*, the root of *conference*, means an opportunity for open dialogue. He then encouraged participants to approach their time together in this mode. From my perspective, the conference was a great success in this regard. What is multiculturalism? What kind of secular state will Muslims accept? Is a politics of shared virtues or values a more useful means of connection and collective action than a politics of identity? Can the erosion of civil liberties in the interests of national security be reconciled? What is the role of white feminists vis-à-vis Muslim women? All of these questions, and many, many more were addressed by conference participants in a spirit of openness. Perhaps openness is the only way forward, as the question of many Islams, many Wests, and the issue of Muslims in western societies is a question that we all, Muslims and non-Muslims, must seriously engage in at this current historical moment.

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US Government and American Muslims Engage to Define Islamophobia

On 4 December 2006, the American Muslims’ national leadership met with key senior American government officials to discuss Islamophobia in the country and American-Muslim relations. The conference, organized by the Bridging the Divide Initiative of the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution, was co-sponsored by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS).

As conference chair, I had to bring together two parties that did not see eye-to-eye on this issue. While American Muslim leaders and participants argued that Islamophobia was not only a reality but also a rapidly growing phenomenon in the United States, the government’s position was that while there have been increased incidences of anti-Muslim episodes in the country, the word *Islamophobia* deepens the divide between the two sides. Other