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Calling Forth Hatred: A Discussion on Marginality, With the Canadian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis as Case Study

Introduction

The concept of multiculturalism, an ideology valuing the coexistence of a multitude of religious traditions and cultures, has been a component of Canadian policy since the 1970s. The 1969 Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism produced a report that was aimed largely at integrating new immigrants smoothly and efficiently into wider Canadian society, particularly economically, by encouraging quick adoption of one of the official languages.¹ This report would later become very influential in guiding official Canadian policies regarding cultural pluralism. One of the most notable suggestions was that new immigrants to Canada could “integrate” without “assimilating,” a distinction that would appear to make room for some variance in cultural activity.² What is unclear in the description the report provides is how much variance, and what types, would be socially or legally permissible. In Canada, with its elected representatives forming government, popular opinion and political power are intertwined. Bruce Lincoln’s model of culture describes cultural transmission and the maintenance of cultural homogeneity. Lincoln provides a framework for understanding how political forces and media can affect the amount of cultural difference a given population will tolerate. As well as discussing Lincoln’s theory this article will examine the real world example of the discourse and events surrounding the Canadian government’s

¹ Michael Dewing, *Canadian Multiculturalism Background Paper* (Ottawa: Library of Parliament, 2012) Publication Number 2009-20-E, October 2012, 2. It is worth noting here that even in this report there is a distinct sense of limited normativity — that there are two official languages and two official forms of culture present in Canada. Portions of the report that we consider to deal with the “multicultural” are pointedly regarding cultures and religions that differ from those originating with early English and French settlers, their descendants and subsequent French or English immigrants. Two points worth noting: first, compared to many other languages and cultures from other places, French and English language are similar and Christianity predominantly influences both cultures; second, Canadian indigenous people are among the “other” groups this document details.

² Dewing, *Canadian Multiculturalism*, 3.

response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis leading up to the Canadian Federal election of 2015. Some background on the political situation in Syria leading to the civil war, and Canada's diplomatic response, will be offered. However, this article will place an emphasis on demonstrating that Canadian political players purposefully and strategically manipulated the values Canadians were acting upon as well as their level of tolerance for cultural difference, and that these political strategies are entirely consistent with the framework that Lincoln has provided.

1.1 Definition of Culture and Brief Explanation of Transmission

It may be useful to establish a working definition for culture. Most of Bruce Lincoln's theoretical approach that will be considered here is taken from his 2010 article "Culture." In this article, Lincoln defines culture as -

[including] a people's communications, artifacts and standard behaviors, but is more importantly associated with the preferences encoded in and transmitted through these items, which are more its vehicles than its essence...[emerging] from processes in which people are slowly educated by those around them to make judgments the group considers appropriate about a great host of things and make meta-judgments about the relative value of their own and other's judgments.³

Key to this definition of culture is the *transmission* of a way of doing something from person to person, and a preference for continuing to do this activity in that particular learned manner. Group identity, the sense of belonging to a particular culture, would then be about acquiring the knowledge of how a particular group of people communicate, and behave, then proceeding to perform those activities in the normative manner. Further emphasis on transmission as encompassing continuity and cycle is offered as Lincoln explains:

people with a specific collective identity make distinctive items of culture which are transmitted to successive generations, imbue more people with the same identity, and they in turn make more items of a similar sort, which they transmit to still further generations... people are slowly educated by those around them to make judgments the group considers appropriate.⁴

After Lincoln provides his working definition of culture, and delineates how culture functions as a set of value-loaded human activities that are acquired over

³ Bruce Lincoln, "Culture," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, eds. Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon (New York: Continuum, 2010), 409-410.

⁴ Lincoln, "Culture," 410.

time, he proceeds to explain how particular cultural sets can vie for dominance in a society or subset of a society. In “Culture,” Lincoln is primarily interested in language and art within a seemingly somewhat self-contained society.⁵ In his examples, cultural domination then applies to whichever groups set the value of particular types of art compared to other types. It seems likely, however, that the same mechanisms could be applied to broader sections of cultural tradition such as language and religion.

Interestingly, the theorist that Lincoln leans most heavily on, Antonio Gramsci, was a neo-Marxist who was primarily concerned with minority cultural and ideological groups’ interactions with larger hegemonic powers. He theorized that much of the power that a particular group can maintain, as pertaining to how they set cultural norms, is affected by language.⁶ Returning to the aforementioned 1969 Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the difference between assimilation and integration could be seen as consisting of a matter of degree as to how much the people of a minority cultural group learn and continue the dominant culture’s practices. Of course, it is generally members of the dominant culture that make the value judgment pertaining to whether enculturation has led to assimilation or integration. The 1969 Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism’s recommendation could be construed as a suggestion that the Canadian government should be satisfied with a relatively “lesser” level of enculturation rather than “more.” The public release of this document, and the expectation of a government’s regulation or policy being affected by the study, reveals that there is elasticity to a society’s tolerance of cultural difference that can be manipulated. One can consider the Canadian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the interplay between political parties and the media leading up to the Canadian federal election of 2015, as a case study on how, and for which reasons, tolerance of cultural difference is manipulated.

⁵ Lincoln, “Culture,” 414–415.

⁶ Alessandro Carlucci, *Gramsci and Languages: Unification, Diversity, and Hegemony* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 147–149. Gramsci was a Sardinian neo-Marxist, economic and cultural theorist, and founding member of the Italian Communist Party.

2. Case Study: Canada's 2015 Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

The following section will provide some basic background on the destabilization of Syria leading to the displacement of millions of people from their homes over the course of the five years I will be examining. The particular example of Canada and the Syrian refugee crisis is useful because it demonstrates how media portrayals of events, politician statements in media, and public responses to those statements, have had real world implications for minority groups within Canada. This example is currently poignant because it demonstrates how much of the manipulation of the public relied on ever-present latent racism and Islamophobia – precisely some of the undercurrents now being manipulated in the United States. The advantage to describing the events in Canada is that we now have had enough time elapse to begin to analyze the public discourse of 2015 and its results.

2.1 Syrian Political Situation Leading to Refugee Crisis

Leading up to 2011 there had been rising tensions between the government of Syria, led by Bashar al-Assad, and sections of the population, particularly in rural areas, where people were experiencing increasing drought, economic depression and resulting poverty.⁷ Public pressure for reforms to address these economic problems remained largely unaddressed, contributing to feelings of disenfranchisement and disconnection from the government. It may be helpful to also consider how ideas of nationalism and valuing the state as a cohesive unit for which to feel allegiance have developed differently in Syria than in Western Europe.⁸ Instead, as Ismail Salwa

⁷ Shamel Azmeh, "Syria's Passage to Conflict," *Politics and Society* 44, no. 4 (December 2016): 502. Azmeh offers a thorough analysis of factors leading to unrest in Syria, including political reforms moving towards neo-liberal government policies more acceptable to urban populations, the many after-effects of colonialism, agricultural decline due to climate change, and an overall increasing disparity between wealthy and poor classes within the country, which corresponded geographically to divisions along political and religious boundaries. The economic factors leading to the Syrian civil war have been largely unreported in North America compared to arguments that the conflict is due to differences of religion. I will suggest in this essay that this misrepresentation is intentional.

⁸ Historical reasons for nationalism manifesting differently include never having organized large-scale military conquests such as the crusades, which would develop the apparatus for state governance as found in much of Europe. Christopher Tyerman describes this apparatus and the change in the way of thinking of the group in his book *How to Plan A Crusade*, particularly the sections on persuasion and strategy. Crusading organization changed European society and systems from banking, organization for creating public support, and communications. Christopher Tyerman, *How to Plan A Crusade: Reason and Religious War in the High Middle Ages* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 231-233, 274-277.

argues, in Arab areas of the world there is a strong sense, across religions, of local regional community, and of being a member of one's tribal or kinship community, and the idea of country or state does not traditionally carry the same strong feelings of affinity that Westerners might assume.⁹

It is difficult to point to any one incident where this discontent finally peaked but the closest is probably in March of 2011 when, in the southern Syrian city of Deraa, widespread protests began following the arrest and torture of several teenagers who had painted anti-government slogans on a school wall. By July, thousands of people were protesting against the Assad regime, with key demands including the release of political prisoners, an end to the state of emergency declared by the government, and reforms to government structure and economic policy.¹⁰ In response to these protests, the Syrian government intensified its crackdown on protesters, divisions within the country intensified, and in 2013 the involvement of ISIS began to contribute to the violence within Syria. Foreign news agencies often focused on classifying the Syrian conflict as the result of religious sectarianism to the exclusion of other causes, particularly in areas where many people often consider themselves as secular or post-religious.

The perceived barbarity involved in religiously motivated conflict is summarized well in John M. Owen and J. Judd Owen's discussion on the confusion in the United States in understanding 9/11 as they describe "one prominent diagnosis was that the Muslim world was trapped in a benighted past – a latter day Dark Age."¹¹ If the conditions leading to 9/11 often seem far removed from the realities of people in Western Europe and North America and easily associated with a past that is viewed, correctly or not, as superstitious, ignorant, dangerous, and most importantly *overcome*, then it should be all the more easy to maintain this separation when regarding a conflict that has not yet obviously been damaging to the people of secular societies. Simply put, the escalating problems within Syria and

⁹ Ismail Salwa, "The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 538.

¹⁰ Salwa, "The Syrian Uprising," 539.

¹¹ John Owen and J. Judd Owen, *Religion, the Enlightenment and the New Global Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

of its people have been framed as their own doing and are claimed to be the type of issues secularized societies might regard themselves as having evolved beyond.

Related to the internal turmoil within Syria was a corresponding breakdown of diplomatic relations. The longest border that Syria has is shared with Turkey, and although the relationship between the two countries has not always been harmonious, they have maintained an important commercial and diplomatic relationship. In August of 2011, Turkey's foreign minister demanded an end to the Syrian government's crackdown on dissidents. When the Assad regime did not respond favourably to this request, Turkey announced a suspension of all trade and diplomatic relations with its southern neighbour.¹² The US had closed its embassy on 6 February, with the UK recalling their ambassador the same day. In March of 2012, a year after the initial conflict began, Canada closed its embassy in Damascus. In an episode of CBC's *Power and Politics*, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird discussed the closure of the embassy, citing a "deteriorating situation" and that "international consensus is that this regime has lost all legitimacy and that the only course of action is for Assad to leave and leave now."¹³ Not only did the severing of diplomatic relations with Syria's government have political effects in the area, it also had very tangible consequences for those people displaced and seeking to leave the area of conflict. Not only was the border with Turkey no longer as easy to cross, but formal channels for travelling further abroad were also increasingly inaccessible. For example, the Canadian embassy in Damascus had handled many visas for people seeking to enter Canada, many of whom had relatives already in Canada. The closure of the Canadian Embassy in Damascus meant not only a severing of diplomatic ties but also that visas for travel to Canada had to be processed in neighbouring countries like Lebanon and Turkey, across borders that had become more controlled, slowing and complicating the process considerably.¹⁴

¹² Jim Muir, "Syria Unrest: Turkey Presses Assad to End Crackdown," *BBC News*, August 9, 2011.

¹³ Laura Payton, "Canada Closes Embassy in Syria," *CBC News*, March 5, 2012.

¹⁴ Daryl Dyck, "How Canada Has Responded to the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Timeline," *CTV News*, November 24, 2015.

Many regular citizens within Syria, regardless of their political affiliations, found themselves unable to provide for themselves. Others were physically displaced from their homes, and even from entire towns, no longer intact after military forces had been through their area. On its website, the UN defines a refugee as:

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.¹⁵

The definition of a refugee as a person forced to flee their country remains the same no matter which country is being exited and this is important to bear in mind as it means that those people who are displaced, but remaining in their country of origin, have no system to seek refuge outside their country of origin until they leave. As large as the numbers of official refugees outside of Syria are, there has continued to be a much larger displaced population within the boundaries of the country.

In an interview Talal Asad gave Hasan Azad of *The Islamic Monthly*, in October 2015, Asad succinctly highlighted the very precarious position of refugees, but this could very well be applied to displaced people within the borders of a country that is no longer functioning. He explains that without a state – and Syria has no real operative and unifying state structure – displaced people are left without a type of affiliation that would otherwise offer protection. Asad paraphrases philosopher Hannah Arendt and explains how “refugees are a tragic exception in our time, vulnerable non-citizens.”¹⁶ The emergence of the nation-state as a powerful unit, and one somewhat imposed on the people of many regions, necessarily leaves those people who no longer belong to a state particularly unprotected. It is a testament to how difficult and dangerous living conditions must be in an area for individuals to choose to risk leaving and encountering the hazards beyond their home country.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, by 2011 over 4.5 million people had overcome obstacles to leaving Syria, and had crossed

¹⁵ US UNHRC Staff, “What is a Refugee,” USA for UNHCR, accessed December 10, 2016. <http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>.

¹⁶ Hasan Azad, “Islam, the West, and our (shared?) Responsibilities,” *The Islamic Monthly*, October 20, 2015.

borders into neighbouring nations. The majority of refugees went to Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey.¹⁷ Syria's problems were no longer internal. This sudden influx of people quickly taxed the limited resources of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.¹⁸ Simultaneously, with so many Syrians now outside of Syria itself there was increased media attention to the situation. European leaders, working with the United Nations, and aware that there is effectively no viable way to seal Europe's borders, were eager for countries further abroad to help in dealing with the buildup of refugees needing resettlement.¹⁹

2.2 Canadian response

In 2012, many Canadians with Syrian relatives attempted to bring family to Canada through reunification programs and they pressured the Canadian government to hasten the process. The Canadian government's response was that it would not do so without an official request from the UN.²⁰ By 14 February 2014, the UN requested 130,000 settlement spaces from its member countries. Although Canada has been one of the main contributors of aid going to temporary settlements in Syria's neighbor countries, the Canadian government, under Stephen Harper, had promised to admit 1,300 refugees. But by its own deadline of March 2014, it had admitted fewer than 200 people, almost all of whom were privately sponsored.²¹ By December, nearly 1,000 had been settled. Under UN pressure, the Canadian government committed to admitting 10,000 more Syrian refugees into Canada over the next four years, by 2018, with a focus on admitting religious minorities rather than displaced Muslims.²²

¹⁷ European Union Staff, "Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis," European Union, accessed December 10, 2016. <http://syrianrefugees.eu/>.

¹⁸ Patrick Kingsley, "EU- Turkey Refugee Deal," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2016. Soon after this Turkey entered negotiations to act as a barrier to an uncontrolled flow of refugees into Europe in exchange for political clout in its bid to enter the EU.

¹⁹ Patrick Kingsley, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis* (London: Guardian Books, 2016), 289.

²⁰ Stephanie Levitz, "A Timeline of Canada's Policies and Decisions During the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *The Canadian Press*, March 31, 2016.

²¹ Peter Goodspeed, "Why Has Canada Only Taken In 200 Syrian Refugees," *The Star*, September 19, 2014.

²² Chris Young, "Canada's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *The Canadian Press*, December 10, 2015.

This opposition to settling Muslim refugees might have continued and remained largely unexamined, certainly not becoming a pivotal election issue, had one major event not happened in 2015. Media attention surrounding Syrian refugees increased dramatically in 2015 with the publication of a photograph of the body of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy, dead on a Turkish beach. The story behind that picture was especially poignant for many Canadians as the intended destination for the Kurdi family had been Canada, where they hoped to join family already living in British Columbia. Suddenly, whether Canada should be accepting Syrian refugees at all, and if so how many, became a major discussion point for all three of the main political parties and their leaders during the 2015 federal election.

The death of Alan Kurdi, presented as an entirely preventable tragedy, sparked something of a grassroots concern for refugees fleeing Syria. The Refugee Council of Canada attributes thousands of interested sponsors as taking action in response to that picture.²³ This was a time of mobilization for many average Canadians and a point when Syrian refugees stopped being an abstraction.

This common interest led to many interfaith initiatives – for example, in Edmonton, the Mennonite Central Committee partnered very quickly with Muslim communities to facilitate sponsorship and together brought over 150 individuals into Canada in 2014.²⁴ On 6 September 2016, Pope Francis called on every European parish, monastery, or sanctuary to come forward and host a family “fleeing death by war and by hunger.”²⁵ Although not directed at North American parishes, this message certainly became part of the impetus to sponsor Syrian refugees. The backlash to this proposed influx of Syrian refugees was swift and would become a central election issue.

²³ CCR Staff, “Refugees: In the Media,” Canadian Council for Refugees, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://ccrweb.ca/en/media-syrian-refugees?page=14>.

²⁴ Affan Chowdhry, “Religious Groups Make Leaps of Faith to Support Syrian Refugees,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2015.

²⁵ Frances D’Emilio, “Vatican takes in refugee families as Vatican calls on Europe to do the same,” *Global News*, September 6, 2015.

3. Examples of Rhetoric Employed to Affect Public Tolerance

Returning to Bruce Lincoln and his theory of culture, Lincoln makes it clear that there are limits to the amount of cultural difference a particular group of people will tolerate. He explains that people who are learning the norms of a culture, and in particular children, are given leeway in their permissible amount of deviation from cultural norms. Others who “consistently fall outside the range the group considers as normative” may face harsh judgment or even punishments.²⁶ The handling of three particular topics during Canada’s 2015 election clearly illustrate how political manipulations, through carefully worded media releases, would repeatedly shift societal tolerance and public opinion. Each example demonstrates issues meant to bring attention to a group or alleged behavior of a group, and suggest it is too marginal to be tolerated.

3.1 “Old Stock Canadians” and “Dog Whistling”

In September 2015, during a debate with Justin Trudeau, Harper infamously stated that accommodating Syrian refugees must be something which “existing and old-stock Canadians agree with.”²⁷ This implied that even if a majority of current Canadian citizens support a stronger humanitarian response to the crisis in Syria, there is some type of existing subset of the population whose preferences in the matter must be followed and prioritized. This “old stock Canadians” comment received a mix of support, with some, like the National Citizens Coalition defending the remark as being a harmless slip, with no ill intent. On the other hand, sharp criticism from editorials from left-wing sources like the Winnipeg Free Press called it out as a not-too-disguised official support for racism and the white supremacy which enables and benefits from it.²⁸ Indigenous groups quickly pointed out that they, the people whose ancestors had first inhabited the land of Canada, certainly were not the “old stock” that was being referred to by Harper. Ontario chief and

²⁶ Lincoln, “Culture,” 410.

²⁷ Ryan Maloney, “Old-Stock Canadians Referenced by Harper in Refugee Debate,” *The Huffington Post Canada*, September 17, 2015.

²⁸ Winnipeg Free Press Editorial Board, “Old-Stock Is Really Code for Racism,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, September 18, 2015.

Ojibway leader Isidore Day, in an interview with the *Toronto Star*, stated that the remarks were clearly racist, not surprising and should not be tolerated.²⁹

However, possibly most concerning, and described most succinctly by EKOS Pollster Frank Graves, is the suggestion that this language was targeted specifically to incite a racist response from Canadians. Graves said that Harper's use of the term "old-stock Canadians" in the debate was intentional, and meant to create divisiveness. Graves said it was the familiar "dog-whistle approach" — that is, sending out a message that will be ignored by all except its target audience.³⁰ This "dog-whistle" theory suggests that "old stock Canadians" was a term used like an encoded message, meant to speak to a section of the Canadian population whose resistance to an influx of Muslim immigrants might otherwise be latent or carefully hidden. As discussed earlier, Lincoln suggests that there is a certain amount of variance which any particular society will tolerate and that certain subsections of a society will be more resistant to changes than others. The "dog-whistle" was meant to mobilize the change-resistant subsection of the Canadian population and gather support for some of the policies that the Conservative Party was proposing that were more restrictive towards Muslims.

3.2 The Issue of Niqab-wearing During the Canadian Citizenship Ceremony

This second issue that became a rallying point for Islamophobic elements of Canadian society was a debate over Muslim women's rights to wear clothing of their choosing that they feel complies with the requirements of their religion. The controversy surrounded the debate over the appropriateness of Muslim women wearing niqab, specifically in citizenship ceremonies; however, this became generalized to broader contexts. In March of 2015 Prime Minister Harper explained that the niqab is the product of a culture that is "anti-woman" very near the time that his Immigration Minister Chris Alexander called the niqab "a perversion of

²⁹ Marco Chownd Oved, "Who Are Old Stock Canadians," *The Star.com*, September 18, 2015.

³⁰ Jonathan Hayward, "Harper's Old-Stock Canadian Line Is Part of a Deliberate Strategy: Pollster," *CBC News*, September 18, 2015.

Canadian values.”³¹ However, the niqab debate appears to have been a manufactured concern. Green Party leader Elizabeth May said “it’s a false debate... What is the impact of the niqab on the economy, what is the impact of the niqab on climate change, what is the impact of the niqab on unemployment?”³² May called out the focus on the niqab as detracting from issues with more serious consequences for most Canadians. The effectiveness of this distraction is difficult to measure. However, it remains revealing that this manufactured issue, of Muslim women wearing niqab to citizenship ceremonies, was expected by Conservative political leaders to elicit indignation from the Canadian population and that the rhetoric surrounding it came to encompass more general condemnation surrounding cultural traditions seen as Muslim or Islamically informed.

3.3 Rhetoric Surrounding Refugees as Security Risks to Existing Canadians

Finally, the Harper government justified the discrepancy between the promised number of refugees to be settled and actual numbers by emphasizing that refugees were potential security risks and that terrorists could potentially arrive alongside legitimate refugees. Interestingly, this reasoning was echoed by the Liberals after they fell short of an election promise to accept 25,000 refugees by the end of 2015. Security concerns following terrorist attacks in Paris were cited as a factor that led to more intensive, and slower, screening.³³ It is unclear to what extent security measures actually are a primary determinant in the speed of refugee processes, but it is a much easier explanation to offer the media and public, and one that plays positively into the Conservative portrayal of refugees and Muslims in general as dangerous, different and always on the verge of becoming terrorists, than more politically complex factors such as strained infrastructure for refugee support

³¹ Canadian Associated Press, “Stephen Harper Doubles Down on Niqab Debate: ‘Rooted in a Culture that is anti-woman,’” *National Post*, March 11, 2015.

³² Allan Woods, “Niqab remains on centre stage in latest debate,” *Toronto Star*, September 9, 2015.

³³ Reuters, “Canada Misses Target of 10,000 Syrian Refugees by Year’s End,” *The Guardian*, December 31, 2015.

or the reworking of quotas of other immigrant categories in response to the influx of refugees to Canada.³⁴

4. Analysis of Dominant Culture and Why This Rhetoric Is Evocative

The unifying thread between all three of these examples of rhetoric utilized by the Conservative party leading to the 2015 election is that all of it was intended to instill distrust towards a minority group, either refugees in particular or Muslims generally. Canada is often considered to be a secular society and, as discussed earlier, multiculturalism as an ideology has been part of the Canadian mythos since at least the 1970s. Tensions within Canada between religious groups began before Confederacy and have continued since but can mainly be summarized as the struggle between opposing Christian denominations or the attempts of minority groups within Canada to retain and practice their own religious or cultural traditions. In her book *Fighting Over God*, Janet Epp Buckingham presents this struggle in several different areas of life but particularly in education and broadcasting. She delineates a struggle beginning before Confederation that focused on tensions between Protestant and Catholic interests in areas of policy and education. She then describes later concerted and purposeful efforts to Anglicize minority groups such as Doukhobors and Mennonites, and to entirely erase the culture of First Nations people.³⁵ Buckingham continues to describe how continuous local challenges to allow inclusion continued but attitudes towards inclusion culminated nationally in the creation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.³⁶ Unfortunately, as Buckingham's history of Canadian religious rights explains, minority peoples such as indigenous people, Sikhs, Jews, and Muslims continued to contend with public opposition when they actually wanted to assert the rights guaranteed to them. It is worth noting, however, that the language used to deny those rights had changed in some cases to emphasize a conflict with secularity rather than Christianity. An example of this concerns the request received

³⁴ Susana Mas, "Liberals Shift Immigration Focus to Family Reunification, Refugee Resettlement," *CBC News*, March 8, 2016.

³⁵ Janet Epp Buckingham, *Fighting Over God: A Legal and Political History of Religious Freedom in Canada* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2014), 33.

³⁶ Buckingham, *Fighting Over God*, 19-21.

by several Ontario school boards for accommodation of the Muslim holidays Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha. These requests were denied and, in responding to the suggestion that Christian holidays were clearly being given preference, one board of education replied that “Christmas and Easter have become secularized holidays or common pause days rather than religious holidays.”³⁷ What can be learned from this is that Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the entrenching of multiculturalism as defined in the Trudeau era may not have dispelled a preference for Christian cultural traditions, but simply renamed them as secular.

4.1 The Myth of Canadian Secularism and Immigration Policy

It is this interesting paradox, and one examined rigorously by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, that allegedly “secular” societies can at once vigorously protect secular laws, values, and institutions rooted in religion while at the same time decrying any outward expression of religion as superstitious, irrational and outdated.³⁸ Hurd is primarily interested in this binary as it applies to nations that identify as secular as compared to nations that are represented, by secular nations, as being religiously governed. This powerful presentation can be seen in the way Syrian factionalism was presented in North American and European news as primarily being an issue of religious sectarian violence. With Hurd’s analysis in mind, viewers of such media can distance themselves from the atrocities they view by seeing them as a result of Syrian people’s own backward folk customs.

If some members of recipient nations consider refugees fleeing Syria to be backward and superstitious, as Hurd’s analysis suggests, then these nations might well consider incorporating these refugees into existing populations to be challenging and might argue that it is impossible. This notion is exacerbated by the fact that, although there may be a prevailing idea that Canada is a secular society, and although some level of religious freedom is protected for minority groups, as we have seen, not only has Canadian culture inherited many deeply Christian values and customs, and continues to perform them, but such values and customs have been

³⁷ Buckingham, *Fighting Over God*, 140.

³⁸ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd. “A Suspension of (Dis) Belief: The Secular-Religious Binary and the Study of International Relations,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Marc Juergensmeyer, Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167.

historically seen as antagonistic to or incompatible with Muslim ones. Talal Asad explains that modern European nations, and by extension the United States and Canada, developed from Christian origins and that many of the core values that citizens in these countries consider “secular,” like human rights and free speech, are, in fact, possible because of a Christian background.³⁹ It is not enough, however, to suggest that the clash of values is primarily between Christianity-informed Canada and incoming Muslim Syrians. The idea that the objection to Muslim immigration was primarily due to a clash between actual Christian and Muslim ideals is somewhat countered by the prevalence of Christian churches and affiliated groups as private sponsors of Syrian refugees, not to mention that many Syrians (including refugees) are not Muslim; it remains, however, salient culturally as a narrative because of a long history in western discursive environments.⁴⁰

4.2 Historical Connections of Rhetoric Employed Against Refugees

Rhetoric framing Muslims as enemies of Christians, and using this depiction to justify aggressions against them, has historical and genealogical roots that easily go back as early as the Crusades.⁴¹ There are parallels in arguments as well, as revenge has been used both in modern contexts following 9/11 and in justifying Crusading.⁴² In the contemporary Canadian context, historical conflicts between Christians and Muslims provided the language needed to mobilize those people with Islamophobic tendencies that might otherwise have remained latent or hidden due to being socially unacceptable. Syria has been depicted as violently religious in contrast to a peaceful and secular Canada. However, since the initial suggestion that Canada should embrace a multicultural national identity, many Canadians have come to view a degree of cultural diversity as acceptable, even desirable. Discourse

³⁹ Talal Asad. “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism,” in *Is Critique Secular Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 15–17.

⁴⁰ The Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has released statistics on the primary language use, family size, and education level of Syrian refugees coming to Canada but statistics on the religious affiliation of refugees accepted since 2015 has not been readily available. See: Joe Friesen, “A Look at Who the Refugees are and Where They Went,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 1, 2016.

⁴¹ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades: Volume 1, A History of the Crusades and the Foundation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 135.

⁴² Tyerman, *How to Plan a Crusade*, 37.

like that on the niqab was used by more conservative political players in an attempt to shift public opinion towards a more rigid standard of cultural homogeneity. To this end, arguments vilifying Muslims are made easier as the individuals who are singled out, such as hijabi women, are visible; and because so much has been said against Muslims in the nearly thousand years since the first Crusade, there is a tradition of language to use in depicting opposition between Muslims and Christians. It is as if a type of rhetorical debris exists whereby one can remove particular words or phrases, such as “Crusade,” from the context and logic of its original use and apply it to new, and not necessarily logically suitable situations, and keep the emotive power and connotations of the first use. An example of this is George Bush’s talk of a “crusade” and talk of doing God’s work was immediately worrying for Muslim groups worldwide as it appeared to be a call to old forms of racism.⁴³ Stephen Harper’s calls to “old-stock Canadians,” the manufactured concerns about niqab in citizenship ceremonies, and the implication that, without very careful screening, Syrian refugees coming into Canada might commit terrorist attacks, seem to have been intended to reinforce racist and Islamophobic ideas as well.

It should be noted, however, that the historical hostility of Christians towards Muslims does not reveal that either Christianity, or Christians, are intrinsically unable to tolerate Islam. Indeed, many of the sponsorship groups and volunteers that have worked to settle refugees have done so without any concerns about the religious identity of the refugees they are sponsoring. Not only is Christianity not necessarily in opposition to Islam but, as demonstrated by Pope Francis’ call for European Catholics to offer aid, Christian theological reasoning can also be used to justify assistance of any person.

⁴³ Peter Waldman, “‘Crusade’ Reference Reinforces Fears that War on Terrorism Is Against Muslims,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2001.

5. Conclusion

The invocation of centuries of animosity and fear towards Muslims did not, in the end, pay off for the Conservative Party of Canada. However, the fact that this discourse did not significantly change the outcome of elections, as appears to have been intended, does not mean that concern about growing or mobilized Islamophobia in Canada is unwarranted. In 2015, the number of incidents considered “hate crimes” fell overall in Canada but there was an increase in the number specifically targeting Muslims, which was more than double the number three years previously.⁴⁴

Another side-effect of the attempt to tap into Canadians’ Islamophobia is the immense amount of public support it brought Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Party leading up to and after the 2015 election. As grassroots support for sponsoring refugees flourished across Canada, the Liberal Party was able to publicly adopt a stance starkly in contrast to that of Harper’s Conservatives and thus commoditize that humanitarian support into a political asset. As Prime Minister, one of Trudeau’s first major photo-ops was handing out coats to incoming Syrian refugees. It was an image that not only made national news but also was seen on media networks across the world.

Finally, it is not as if manufacturing intolerance for political gain stopped with the Canadian federal election of 2015. Instead, the language, and the intolerance it incited, is much more frequent and clear in the United States following the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Far from being only of theoretical interest, understanding who the major influencers of public opinion are, what their interests are, and how they manipulate public opinion for their own ends, is of critical importance as we face an uncertain future.

⁴⁴ Anna Mehler Paperny, “Hate Crimes Against Muslims More Than Doubled in 3 Years,” *Global News*, April 23, 2016.

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