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Discrimination within Political Cultures: Contrasting Islamophobia in Canadian Regions

By Shannon Coyne

Since the United States declared a 'war on terror' after 9/11, Muslim people and communities have increasingly become political and social targets in Canadian society. Although Canadian Political Science literature addresses Islamophobia, there is a significant focus on discrimination specifically within Quebec or broadly at the federal level. The exclusion of other provinces from academic scrutiny is problematic and can lead to the assumption that certain social issues are more prominent in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. In fact, differences in each province's political culture suggests that discrimination against Othered groups may appear in varied ways. The recognition of different types of discrimination is important because it will impact how to prevent bias against the vulnerable group. By utilizing a social constructivist lens to compare and contrast case studies of Islamophobia in Alberta and Quebec, this research paper argues that provincial political culture influences the ways in which Islamophobia may manifest.

There is a cultural myth that suggests that Canada supports and celebrates a pluralist society because of its recent policy of multiculturalism. However, this idea fails to take into account that, though it may provide legal support against hate crimes and instances of discrimination, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* does not realistically protect vulnerable groups from economic, social, and political inequalities. A poll by Angus Reid Institute states that a total of 68% of Canadians believe that immigrants ought to fit in more with mainstream society (Angus Reid Institute, 2016). This strong majority suggests that Canada is not necessarily the multicultural, accepting society it claims to be. Since 9/11 immigrant and Canadian-born Muslims have increasingly become targets of Canadian media and government legislation. Academic research focuses on national (and specifically Quebec) Islamophobia,

however I argue that it is prominent in the political and public culture of Western provinces such as Alberta as well. By analysing media responses to instances of Islamophobia in Alberta and Quebec, this essay will explore similarities and differences in both province's imagining of the Muslim Other.

To do this, I will discuss two cases of Islamophobia, Bill 94 in Quebec and the Webber Academy incident in 2015 in Alberta, in order to highlight that the diverse political cultures of these provinces results in different forms of direct or indirect discrimination, and therefore should be treated as different problems with different solutions. My methodology will be to adopt a social constructivist lens to analyze language used in policies and media coverage of these situations. Before delving into those case studies, I will clarify academic vocabulary regarding discrimination and multiculturalism to aid in diagnosing and addressing each case study. I will first explore academic literature to prove that discrimination of Muslims is present in Canada, and that it has a significant negative impact on individuals, our collective society, and the legitimacy of the Canadian government's promise of 'multiculturalism'. Lastly, I will give a brief description of the similar and varying elements of Alberta and Quebec's historical and political culture in order to establish a basis before comparing and contrasting the discrimination within both. In this text I mainly refer to the veil or hijab, however I acknowledge that women can pair it with an abaya, niqab, jibab, or other garments, and that they may also be worn in different styles. I also recognize that, though I only refer to 'Muslims' and 'Islam' there are a variety of manifestations and sects of Islam within the Canadian Muslim community.

The Multiculturalism Act (1988) provides legal support against racialized and religious discrimination, among other forms. Though for many, Canada's official stance of multiculturalism is anti-racist and meant to protect minorities, there are many scholars who critique multiculturalism as a form of racialization. For instance, Jakeet Singh argues that this policy is a "liberal difference-blind approach" which assumes that all religious and cultural aspects are meant only for the private sphere, whereas white culture is seen as neutral and appropriate for public life (Singh 451). In other words, "while whiteness becomes associated with the public and universal, other forms of life become marginalized, as they are associated with the private" (451). By consequence, this liberal approach to multiculturalism racializes non-white people, whereas whiteness is seen as a neutral form of life. Canadian public opinion polls supports Singh's analysis of Canadian culture. In 2016, 58% of Canadians agreed that religion ought to be "[kept] completely out of public life" (Angus Reid Institute 2016). Singh suggests the liberal difference blind approach did not begin with *The Multiculturalism Act* (447), but that it is simply propagating it in Canadian political culture.

Through this critique of Canadian liberal difference-blind multiculturalism, we begin to understand how racialized groups and individuals are still facing discrimination on political, social, and economic levels. Before delving into specific examples, I draw on the work of Denise Helly to explore differences between direct, indirect, systematic, institutionalized, and voluntary discrimination. These definitions will be useful when contrasting and comparing forms of discrimination in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Helly defines direct discrimination as "when one or more personal characteristics based on unlawful criterion are explicitly applied to deny a right or a freedom" (DRE). An example of this type of discrimination is a hate crime because it is based on a personal trait, and prohibits the right to dignity, safety, and/or the enjoyment of property (Helly). Hate crimes are often seen through vandalism, public insults, violence, or incitement of hatred. Unfortunately, hate crimes are often poorly recorded due to scarcity of victims formally complaining as well as a lack of police uniformity in recording details of hate

crimes (Helly 2004). While direct discrimination is an act which purposefully disadvantages and harms people of specific characteristics, indirect discrimination occurs when an action has an unevenly damaging effect on specific groups or persons who share a common personal characteristic, without needing the discriminatory intention (Helly 2004). For example, employment policies which, though perhaps unintentional, unfairly omit particular genders or cultural groups. Similarly, institutionalized discrimination is the exclusion of specific people from enjoying rights available to others through public laws and measures (Helly 2004). The difference between this form and indirect discrimination, is that institutional discrimination is perpetrated by government or political forces through policies, laws, or other means. A Canadian example of this is from the early to middle 20th Century, when immigration quotas were applied to applicants from Middle Eastern or Asian countries but not to predominantly white European states.

The last two forms of discrimination are not analysed through one specific incident or action, but rather a collective mindset and history surrounding racialization and exclusion of specific groups. When academics use the term *systemic discrimination*, they typically refer to “inequalities between groups of people [that] are not ascribable to an identifiable factor but seem to be linked to a number of past and/or present factors” (Helly 2004). An important example of this in Canadian society is the imbalance between educational success and post-graduation economic success. According to a study by Statistics Canada in 2011, second generation racialized Canadian men will typically have more educational success, yet receive less earnings than a white employee (Banting and Thompson 2016, 5). This trend is the same for women, yet with a lesser wage gap between a white and racial minority women. This inequality is not easily identifiable, but demonstrates subtle discriminatory factors in employers and workplaces. Systemic discrimination can often point to voluntary discrimination, which is the attitudes or actions that exclude people from daily society due to unlawful criterion. Helly recognises that voluntary discriminations is “difficult to prove, difficult to quantify, poorly documented, and seldom results in formal complaints” due to its subtle and social nature. However, there are examples of how it could manifest, such as the underrepresentation of ethno-cultural groups in specific community clubs, associations, and social networks (Helly 2004). In relation to Muslim Canadians, Helly identifies the high concentration of coverage on an orientalist view of conflicts in the Middle East as voluntary discrimination.

To summarize, academics provide us with useful tools and language to analyse and identify sources and types of discrimination in the multicultural political, social, and economic spheres of Canada. Singh analysed Canada’s apparent state of “non-culture” in order to identify a liberal difference-blind approach which assigns whiteness to the neutral public sphere and excludes non-whiteness to the voluntary private associations. This, paired with Helly’s explanations of types of discrimination (direct, indirect, institutionalized, systemic, and voluntary), allows an analysis of discrimination within the Canadian context. The following section will prove that discrimination against Muslims is present in Canada and that it has a significantly negative impact on individuals, collective society, and the legitimacy of Canadian multiculturalism.

In theory, multiculturalism is supposed to provide a tolerant sphere, where any individual can express their thoughts and beliefs without fear of harassment or assimilation. However, as seen by analysing Canadian multiculturalism, Whiteness is believed to be the neutral state, and any “voluntary” signs of religion or belief is meant for a private sphere. Some scholars suggest that “religious minorities are stigmatized and experience discrimination based on religion, and on a perception of religious

minorities as a racialized “other”” (Reitz 2009, 701). Increasingly, and paradoxically, the religious garments that Muslim women choose to wear has become a public and political issue. For instance, in 2015 whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear a veil in court or citizenship ceremonies was a federal election issue. Canadians often view the hijab as a form of oppression, which Muslim women are to be passively freed from (Rahmath 34). However, according to interviews done with twenty-six Muslim women in Thunder Bay, Calgary, and Toronto, many women choose to veil to represent and abide by religious values, as well as to escape from “Western beauty standards” (38). In fact, some immigrant Muslim women only began to veil themselves once arriving in Canada, in order to demonstrate religious beliefs (37). Despite having religious and cultural motivations for veiling, which should be protected under *The Multiculturalism Act* (1988), many Muslim women reported an increased sense of fear and hostility since beginning to wear the hijab (37). Canadian Muslims often face hate crimes, such as threats and vandalism of symbolic buildings, as well as voluntary discrimination in social interactions. This has been worsened by the concentration of media upon Muslims and conflict, which has led to Muslim people to be associated with danger. From having to prove rationality and Canadian citizenship, to verbal insults and threats, “the perception of being viewed as the “other” was expressed by many of the participants” (37). This study has clearly demonstrated that on an individual level Muslim people, and women in particular, face societal discrimination that has a negative impact on their sense of belonging and security in Canada.

At a collective level, systemic discrimination is evident due to slower rates of integration for Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Hindus (Reitz 2009, 695). Though all visible minorities are typically at an economic disadvantage in Canadian society, when comparing income relative to CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) mean, it is clear that visible minority Muslims are at the highest disadvantage at an income of 15,320 under the mean (710). As discussed earlier, there is also an imbalance between the educational success and economic success of racialized men (Banting and Thompson, 5). These statistics demonstrate that at a societal level, racialized Muslim people are systematically discriminated against in Canadian society. This points to a problem of legitimacy of Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, since it is clear that its “[antidiscrimination provisions] offer little protection for social or economic rights and no guarantees of racial and class equality in economic terms” (11). At an individual and collective economic level, Muslim people face voluntary, direct and systemic discrimination in Canadian society. This proves that Islamophobia is present in Canadian society, despite our political policies, and that it has a negative impact on social unity. This is not only a problem for Muslim Canadians, but for the nation in general. Slow integration of particular groups demonstrates that Canada is not a mosaic of cultures, but a hierarchy in which Whiteness is the neutral and desired characteristic of public life.

Case Studies

In the previous section, I clarified academic lexicon to distinguish differences in discrimination and then statistically demonstrated that Islamophobia is present and significant in Canada. I will now argue that there are differences in this discrimination based on region- namely, that there are differences within Quebec compared to the Rest of Canada. I argue that this variety of types of discrimination originates from the differences in political culture of each region. I explore this by comparing two case studies, one in Alberta, and the other in Quebec. I acknowledge that there are provincial and regional differences within Canada beyond the Quebec/Rest of Canada divide. Due to space limitations of this

research paper, I am unable to compare the differences within each province, and assume Alberta to be mildly representative of the Rest of Canada.

Before exploring the case studies, I will give a brief description of Quebec's political culture relative to the Rest of Canada. There are three main aspects that influence and differentiate Quebecois political society from other Canadian provinces: its history of public secularism, unofficial interculturalism, and the imposition of multiculturalism.

Though French Canadian culture has traditionally been dominated by Catholicism, during the 1960s Quebecois populations shifted away from religious influence, taking up the view that the Catholic Church was impeding social progress (Bakali 2015, 414). Whereas the Church had initially provided vital social services such as education, it was incrementally pushed out of public life in place of secularism (414). This period of time is known as the Quiet Revolution, which is characterized by increased secularism, resistance to economic disadvantages and discrimination towards French Canadians. Also, due to an increase in immigration post World War II, ethnic and linguistic tensions rose, and nationalism became founded upon the protection of the French language and identity (415). The focus of Quebec on preservation of language and privilege has led to tensions between the province and the federal government and ultimately, to two separatist referendums. However, Quebec nationalism has not only strained the province's dynamic outside of its borders, but within as well. Since its protectionist history emphasizes public secularism and French culture, immigration presents a challenge. Notably, Muslim identities within Quebec have been treated as a threat to French white secular values (416). The debate surrounding 'reasonable accommodation' is often portrayed by media as a medium for this Muslim threat, because it allows individuals to request exception to norms or laws on a religious basis (Conway 2012, 196). For a political culture that values separation between religion and public life, this issue has been increasingly problematic and has further 'Othered' Muslim Quebecois.

Another important aspect of Quebec's political culture is that the policy of multiculturalism was imposed upon the province by the federal government in order to counter the Quebec separatist movement. *The Multiculturalism Act* (1988) enabled the government to appeal to Canadians as a collection of diverse cultures, thereby underemphasizing the distinction of Quebecois culture from the rest of Canada. In response to multiculturalism, the province has unofficially adopted the policy of interculturalism, which is a social contract between the public and 'new comers' that ensures that French public culture is protected (Bakali 418). Interculturalism is "rooted in the notion of self-preservation" and promotes the assimilation of racial minorities in favor of "French white Quebecois culture" (418). These characteristics are a significant part of Quebec political culture and will therefore influence how discrimination against Muslims manifests within the province.

For the most part, academia focuses largely on Canadian Islamophobia at the federal level or specifically in Quebec. However, it is clear that in the Rest of Canada there is Islamophobia at a provincial level as well. In fact, a study demonstrates that a smaller percentage of racialized Muslims within Quebec report discrimination and vulnerability (described as "feeling uncomfortable or fearing attack" (Reitz 2009, 711)) than those residing outside of Quebec (711). This indicates that Islamophobia is an issue in the Rest of Canada as well, even if scholars have not explored it. In fact, The Alberta Muslim Public Affairs Council (AMPAC) has recently created a hotline for victims of Islamophobia in order to provide support in response to rising frequencies of hate crimes in the province (Rieger 2016). Also,

whereas a 2013 Angus Reid Institute poll demonstrates that Quebec opinions of Muslims has remained consistent at approximately 69% holding an unfavorable view, in the rest of Canada unfavorable opinions of Islam has risen from 46% in 2009 to 54% in 2013 (Geddes 2013). Clearly, Islamophobia is not unique to Quebecois political culture and it could be growing in Canada as a whole.

Due to variations in provincial and regional differences, it is difficult and problematic to assign one specific cultural characteristic to the Rest of Canada. However, since I am focusing my case study on Alberta and Quebec, I can identify aspects that are present in Quebec that are not an important aspect of Albertan political culture. For instance, whereas Quebec has favored secularist political policy, “Alberta remains the bedrock of small-c conservatism, favouring smaller government and more emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities when responding to policy face-off questions” (Angus Reid 2016). There is little provincial government involvement in Albertan Islamophobia, instead discrimination seems to be confronted by Muslim associations or through the judiciary system. The lack of government intervention could be a result of the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta’s forty years in provincial government. However, a lack of government response does not mean that Islamophobia against Muslims is not present. Instead, it suggests a tendency towards seldom reported types of incidents such as direct, voluntary, and systemic discrimination. On the other hand, a political culture that values provincial government intervention to protect secularism and French culture might tend towards institutionalized discrimination through laws and policies.

The contrast between Albertan and Quebecois Islamophobia is demonstrated by exploring two case studies. The first was an incident in Calgary, Alberta in 2015, in which two Sunni Muslim both were prohibited from praying at their private school, Webber Academy. They were in Grade 9 and 10, and their families had explicitly confirmed prior to enrollment that they would be permitted to occasionally pray for approximately 5 minutes at school (Tucker 2015). However, they were quickly prohibited from praying due to their religion being “too obvious for a non-denominational school” (Graveland 2016). The school has a policy of no religious activities on campus, which included discreet, private prayer on campus. However, it is important to note that this policy of secularism only applies to certain faiths which require prayer during the school day and whose forms of prayer is physically noticeable. One of the boys testified that “[he] had this intense sense of shame and humiliation, despite that I was just exercising my right as a Canadian citizen, as a human being, to practice my faith” (Graveland 2016). The Alberta Human Rights Commission fined the private school \$26,000 due to discriminating against the boys and causing them distress and loss of dignity (Dempster 2015).

This incident demonstrates key aspects of Islamophobia in Alberta. First of all, it was a form of direct discrimination because it denied a right to fulfillment of faith and religion based on a specific type of prayer. The situation also highlights the impact of liberal difference-blind dominance in Canadian society because the policy of non-denominational education assumes that religion can be separated from public life. The characterization of Muslims as a ‘special interest group’ is a prominent idea in Albertan political culture, which is reflected in the media coverage of this case. In an analysis of articles from three well-known and reputable news sources (*National Post*, *Global News*, and *CBC News*), all three headlines specifically explicitly include “Muslim” and only one of them includes the name of the school in the headlines. This is an example of how Muslims and Islam is repeatedly associated to conflict. The article from Global News was by far the most sympathetic, as it took a perspective from the boys’ families. However, the other two both place the private school as the subject of the article title, and the “Muslim

students” (Dempster 2015, McClure 2015) as the object. This places the boys in the syntactic position of action, which hints that they were perpetrators of the incident and the school was the passive victim. While all articles do present factual information about the issue, some titles initially send a biased message. This case study is an example of how discrimination manifests non-politically in Alberta, and perhaps in the Rest of Canada as well. Since it is often through direct, voluntary, or systemic discrimination, these instances often go unreported or are solved by the legal system.

Though direct discrimination, such as violence, verbal insults, and other hate crimes are present in Quebec (CBC News 2013), the province also demonstrates Islamophobia through political means. The second case study that I will analyse is the media and academic response to the Quebec provincial government’s Bill 94, *An Act to Establish Guidelines Governing Accommodation Requests Within the Administration and Certain Institutions*, which was tabled in 2010. Ultimately, this Bill requires women requesting services from or working for the public sector to remove face coverings. Premier Jean Charest justified Bill 94 as “respect[ing] the principle of equality between men and women, and the religious neutrality of the state” (CBC News 2010) by ensuring that there are conditions upon which reasonable accommodation can be granted. Though Islam was not mentioned explicitly in the Bill, some scholars argue that “it would have a disproportionate effect on Muslim women wearing a veil” (Conway 2012, 195). A popular opinion is that the Bill would liberate Muslim women from “a symbol of patriarchal oppression” (Conway 201). However, as explored through Rahmath’s interviews with Muslim women, the veil is often a source of empowerment to Canadian women, and not a sign of submission. Despite the popularity of the Bill in Quebec, the Parti Quebecois did not support it, and it did not pass (Maclean’s 2014).

This Bill reflects a significant difference in Islamophobia between the Alberta and Quebec. Whereas both provinces have instances of direct and voluntary discrimination, Quebec is exceptional in that there have been multiple instances of institutionalized discrimination against Muslim people. This case study demonstrates that the Quebec political culture of protecting the ‘neutral’ public sphere allows for non-white French Quebecois values and rights to be marginalized under the justification of secularism. Bill 94 has simply been one instance in the reasonable accommodation debate which implicitly revolving the perceived threat of the Muslim ‘Other’. The Quebec government has attempted to impose public service secularism with Bill 62, Bill 94, and the Charter of Values, which demonstrates a pattern of using political means to discriminate and marginalize Muslims in Quebec. I argue that this pattern originates from Quebec’s unique political culture within Canada, especially from its protectionist policy of interculturalism and the secular influences of the Quiet Revolution.

Since there is variety in manifestations of Islamophobia in between the Rest of Canada and Quebec, they cannot be solved in the same way. Though Canadian political culture as a whole seems to value ‘neutral’ secularism, Quebec propagates this notion through political laws and policies that target specific groups of people. Therefore, democratic means, such as organized protests or the lobbying of associations and groups could provide some voice for marginalized groups within Quebec. On the other hand, in the Rest of Canada (particularly in Alberta) the government seldom intervenes in matters of direct discrimination and perhaps ought to enhance discrimination prevention strategies. One aspect that is not altered by the political cultures of individual provinces is that fear and discrimination of Muslims challenges multiculturalism as a valid policy within Canada. The rhetoric that Canada accepts of all cultures, ethnicities and religions only seems to apply to non-racialized peoples whose beliefs adhere

to the assumed 'neutral' sphere of Canada. *The Multiculturalism Act* (1988) is not satisfactorily protecting minority groups, especially Muslims.

Throughout this research paper I argued that differences in Canadian regional political cultures impact the forms of Islamophobia by comparing the political culture and Islamophobia in Quebec and Alberta. To do so, I clarified academic vocabulary and theory in order to understand how forms of discrimination can be distinguished from each other. I have drawn from Singh's exploration of Canadian multiculturalism from a liberal difference-blind perspective in order to highlight problems with Canada's emphasis on secular public space. This theory and academic research aided in contrasting Quebecois and Albertan political cultures and incidences of Islamophobia. These incidents both demonstrated that political culture can have a significant influence on how discrimination might manifest within a society, and therefore should be taken into consideration when attempting to find a solution to the issue. Islamophobia challenges the belief that Canadian identities and values are centered on multiculturalism and acceptance, and proposes that either the principle or the policy will need to be reworked in the future.

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