DIFFERENTIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIONS AMONG SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN CANADA

Peter Beyer

Introduction: 1.5 and Second Generation Immigrant Youth in Global and Local Context

The question of how immigrants and their offspring are adapting in Western countries is currently a topic of much discussion both inside and outside academic circles. In light of more recent events in a number of European countries especially, policy makers, intellectuals, the media, and members of the public throughout the so-called West and beyond seem to have been publicly agonizing about what many of them fear is the evident failure of segments of their relatively new populations to become solidly integrated into the mainstreams of their societies. As is usual in the post-9/11 context, Muslims, regardless of their internal variety and regional or cultural origins, have come in for particular scrutiny in this regard. Even more urgently, the locally raised and locally born generations of Muslim migrants have become the subject of special concern as young members of this demographic group have revealed themselves to be among the prime perpetrators of a number of sensational violent acts ranging from riots and assassinations to terrorist bombings and clandestine cell formation. The attitude seems to have been that, while it is perhaps understandable that the first generation would have trouble adapting and would, as it were, ‘bring their grievances with them’, the second generations should have overcome this difficulty to ‘fit in’ to become ‘normal citizens’ and ‘adopt the values of the host society’. Events over the past few years, such as the March 2004 Madrid commuter train bombings, the November 2004 assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, the London transit bombings in July of 2005, the riots in the suburbs of Paris in the fall of that same year, and, in Canada, the June 2006 arrest of members of a terrorist cell, largely consisting of teenagers and young adults, have called these assumptions into question, leading various influential figures in several countries to call for a complete rethinking of immigration and immigrant settlement policies. Such
voices, which have always been there, are now apparently being taken much more seriously.¹

In the social-scientific literature on immigrants in Western countries, the questions of generations and youth have been a common focus, in large measure because there are significant differences between these groups and their older first generation relatives.² The second and subsequent generations grow up ‘adapting’ to the ‘new’ country and are, in that respect, formally as comparable to the long-established native-born as they are to their parents and grandparents. They provide a logical bridge between the ‘immigrants’ and the ‘hosts’. Those who arrive as immigrants at a young age, especially before puberty, are in most senses generally more like their native-born siblings than their parents and older siblings; and this feature points to the normally greater adaptability or malleability of the young when it comes to adapting to new circumstances. In the context of the larger question of immigrant adaptation, integration, marginalization, assimilation, and transformation (of both them and their ‘host’ society), native-born generations and the young are therefore of considerable interest in as much as they embody the longer term consequences and implications of migration, in the present case of contemporary transnational migration in particular.

Given the scientific importance of immigrant youth and second generations, therefore, before any of the aforementioned events took place, my colleagues and I had already joined those researchers in several countries looking at these locally raised and locally born offspring of more recent immigrant cohorts to the West.³ In our case, however, we sought specifically to find out more about the religious lives of

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¹ To cite but two Canadian instances, see articles by Robert Sibley (2008), a columnist for the Ottawa Citizen newspaper, and Mark Steyn (2006), a columnist for the magazine, Maclean’s (the Canadian equivalent of Time). For an official response in this atmosphere, see the report of Quebec’s Bouchard-Taylor commission on “reasonable accommodation” (Bouchard & Taylor 2008).

² For examples of research on this question before the current decade in various Western countries, including Canada, see Kallen 1977; Bhatnagar 1984; Young 1991; Portes & Zhou 1993; Maani 1994; Geschwender & Guppy 1995; Khosrokhavar 1997; Beiser 1998; Vertovec & Rogers 1998; Zhou & Bankston III 1998. Only in a minority of cases has this vast literature dealt with religion.

³ In Canada, not much research has yet been done on religion with respect to the second generation, most research focusing on such issues as educational attainment, income, and identity (e.g. Gosine 2000; Hanvey & Kunz 2000; Anisef & Kilbride 2003; Abada, Hou et al. 2008; Corak 2008). Work on religion in this regard includes Eid 2003; Nayar 2004; Pearson 2004; Beyer 2005; Liao 2007; Ramji 2008.