CHAPTER 7

Misunderstood Population?
Methodological Debate on Demography of Muslims

Yaghoob Foroutan

This chapter focuses on a methodological aspect of the study of religion, including demographic studies, using the case study of Muslims in Australia as a focus. The discussion of this chapter emphasizes the underlying fact that if populations within the same religion are considered under a single category without giving attention to their compositional characteristics and ethnic diversity, then such studies are likely to provide misleading knowledge. This chapter also shows that such methodological caution particularly applies to adherents of the world’s fastest-growing religion, Muslims, residing in western contexts because Muslims have substantial demographic disparities by ethnic origin, often encounter Islamophobia in the contemporary western world, and are extremely at the exposure of experiencing ‘social and cultural distance’ (e.g., Berry 1992; Chiswick et al. 2003; Foroutan 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2012). Accordingly, this chapter examines whether and to what extent data on religion can be reliable in demographic analyses. This examination is based on population censuses, which also serve as valuable nationwide data sources in demographic analyses. This multiplies the importance of the key objectives of this study; that is, the existence and the extent of reliability of data on religion with specific attention to Muslims in western contexts.

Background

Muslim populations in western settings have received increasing attention in the contemporary literature. One reason is the substantial demographic increase of Muslims in Europe particularly, where Islam is now the second largest religion in terms of population (Brown 2000; Buijs and Rath 2002; Savage 2004; EUMC 2006; Michaels 2009; Colman 2012). For instance, the literature documents that European Muslims have the highest fertility and younger age structure (e.g., Westoff and Frejka 2007; Colman 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2012). Further, Muslims’ unique demographic characteristics have been termed as ‘the demographic time bomb’ (Michaels 2009) which will also increase

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substantially the share of Muslims from the continent’s total population: from almost only 5% at the present time to 8% in 2030 (Pew Research Center 2011) and about 25% by 2100 (Jenkins 2006).

Moreover, the literature identifies that the ethnic composition of Muslim communities varies significantly across western societies. It has, for instance, been documented that Pakistanis and Indians constitute the majority of Muslims in the UK; in Germany, Muslims are primarily from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia; Muslims in France are largely Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian; and American Muslims mainly include South Asians (around 25%), Arabs (about 12%), Africans (6%), Iranians (4%), and Turks (2%) (Buijs and Rath 2002; Westoff and Frejka 2007; Foner and Alba 2008; Colman 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2012).

Methodology

This section presents the main methodological concerns of this study, including the field of study, data sources, and the statistical method of analysis. This study is located in the multicultural context of Australia, home to a wide range of religions and cultures from around the world. There have been three major stages of the settlement history of Muslims in Australia. The first stage started before European settlement; from the seventeenth century, there was communication between Muslim Macassar fishermen in Indonesia and the Aboriginal people (Cigler 1986, Bouma 1994, Adhikari 2001, Cleland 2001; Foroutan 2008, 2012). The second stage was in the nineteenth century, where Muslims from largely Afghanistan and India migrated to Australia with camels and played a key role in national development, including the building of roads, dams, and railways (Schinasi 1980, Cigler 1986; Foroutan 2011). Muslims in Australia faced a difficult period after the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act that was based on the White race and European language. However, accompanied by substantial economic improvements requiring labour migration, the settlement of Muslims entered a third phase in the second half of the twentieth century. Overall, the vast majority of Muslims have migrated to Australia since 1971.

Despite the fact that the Australian Muslim population is very diverse by birthplace, Turkish and Lebanese immigrants have constituted the highest proportion of Muslims in Australia since 1971 (Cigler 1986; Bouma 1994; Adhikari 2001; Cleland 2001; Foroutan 2009). Muslim immigration to Australia is also partly due to political hardship, religious persecution, sectarian intolerance, and civil war in the homelands. For instance, around 4,000 Lebanese Muslims came to Australia within the first two years of the outbreak of the 1975 civil war there (Foroutan 2009). The arrival of European Muslims after World War II was motivated by the bilateral agreement between the International Refugee Organisation and the Australian government in 1947 (Jones 1993). The population of Muslims in Australia increased markedly from about 22,000 in 1971 to approximately 280,000 in 2001 and 340,000 in 2006. The last census in 2011 reported almost 480,000 (Adhikari 2001; Foroutan 2011; ABS 2006, 2012). According to The Future of the Global