Local Multicultural Politics, Muslim Integration and Religious Identity through Digital Technologies of the Self: Case studies from Finland and the Québec Province (Canada)

Tanja Riikonen PhD student Religious studies Université de Montréal tanja.riikonen@umontreal.ca
Fred Dervin Adjunct Professor Intercultural communication & Education Sociology of multiculturalism University of Turku freder@utu.fi

The following article proposes to compare the multicultural politics in Finland and in the Québec Province of Canada. It examines how the construction of Muslim religious identity through digital technologies can reflect and challenge integration in these contexts. The analysis is based on two Muslim discussion forums in the respective locations. The aim is to explore the Foucauldian concept of “technologies of the Self” in its digital ‘postmodern’ form in relation to the local integration of Muslims in the ‘host society’. The main argument is based on Foucault’s idea of the ‘conduct of a conduct’ and the derived argument that macro-level multicultural politics can have an impact on Muslim identity in the locality. Even though the data do not allow generalizations about the impact of these politics, the discussion forums reveal two strategies that guide Muslims and Muslim immigrants towards a better and correctly practiced Islam, helping them to strip everyday life of elements disturbing the essential obligation of Muslims in a host society.

Introduction

The presence of Islam and Muslims on the internet is dynamic and plentiful today. Its importance for Muslim migrant populations also appears to be vital, as it provides them with e.g. an excellent opportunity to find and spread information, to respond to and interact with others and to remain connected with their religious networks and religious leaders in distant lands (Lövheim and Linderman 2005, Larsson and Björkman 2010, Mishra and Seeman 2010). The internet can also serve to build ‘new’ ‘solid’ identities, as can be the case of immigrants and religious converts in various minority contexts. This article examines how Muslim religious identity construction through digital technologies reflects and challenges integration in Finland and in the Québec Province of Canada.

Many societal aspects have been the basis of comparison between Finland and Canada: bilingualism (McRae 1978), social participation of Vietnamese refugees (Valtonen 1999), education (Pelletier 2007), art education (Ketovuori 2007), and skilled worker immigrants (Kovanen and Noki 2008). Yet researchers have rarely suggested comparing Finland and the Canadian province of Québec. At first sight the comparison seems risky as Lutheran Protestant majority Finland, a sovereign nation state since 1917 is often characterised by “culturally homogeneity” and emigration whereas the history of Catholic majority Québec is bound with immigration. However, Québec’s historical and political “national consciousness” built up by stateless nation-building (Keating 1997) compares with sovereign Nation States in Europe. Both
of the study contexts are also often characterised as highly secularised societies (see Palmer 2011).

Our main argument is based on the hypothesis that local multicultural politics have an impact on Muslim identity construction. In fact they can be seen as a means of governing individuals “as a society, as a part of a social entity, as a part of nation or a state” (Foucault 1988:146). Our interest lies especially in the contact point between many and varied technologies of the domination of others and the self, which Foucault calls “governmentality” (Foucault 1988:19). For Foucault ‘government’ implies ‘the conduct of a conduct’, that is to say, a form of activity which shapes, guides or affects the conduct of people (Gordon 1991:2) “in relation to objectives of national prosperity, harmony, virtue, productivity, social order, discipline, emancipation, self-realization and so forth” (Rose 1996:135). This relates the ‘conduct of a conduct’ to the ways in which individuals experience, understand, judge and conduct themselves (ibid.).

This leads us to another important concept for this study: technologies of the self (Foucault 1988). According to Foucault, technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and the way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988:18). These technologies, which are “hybrid assemblages of knowledges, instruments, persons, systems of judgement, buildings and spaces, underpinned at the programmatic level by certain presuppositions about, and objectives for, human beings”, are used but also practised within the (actual or imagined) authority of a system of truth represented by particular technical practices, such as group discussions, diary writings and confessions (Rose 1996:132,135). This way, the notion of technology refers “to any assembly structured by a practical rationality governed by a more or less conscious goal” (Rose 1996:132).

Though Foucault looked at technologies of the self used in Ancient Greece, the concept appears to be fruitful to talk about today’s digital world, where the use of blogs, podcasts, and more recently social media such as Facebook and Twitter has allowed individuals to write and talk about themselves virtually everywhere through easily accessible technologies. We thus use the phrase ‘Digital Technologies of the Self’ to refer to the use of the Internet for co-constructing, enacting and expressing identification, as suggested by Dervin and Abbas (2009) in their interpretation of Foucault’s Technologies of the Self (1988). As a consequence, in this paper, we concentrate on the use of the internet and particularly discussion forums as special forms of technologies of the self.

Two active Muslim discussion forums from Finland and Québec will serve as case studies and do not claim to represent Muslim communities as a whole, be it in Finland, Québec, or elsewhere: there are too many answers to the questions “what is a Muslim?” (cf. Bilgrami 1992), and “who is to define this category?” (Carlomb 2003) to allow us to do that. As researchers, we need to refrain from limiting the freedom of others to ‘choose’ their identity (Sen 2006, 31), even if the exercise is difficult as we base our own study on Muslim immigrants. That is why our understanding of “Muslims” is based on the self-identification of people – the construction of the Self – on the Internet as we want to avoid “‘knowing’ the identities whose very construction ought to be precisely the issue under investigation” (Kulick 1999, 6).
Multicultural politics and religion: renewing the concept of integration

Integration is a key concept of multicultural politics in both our study contexts (Saukkonen and Pyykkönen 2008, Potvin et al. 2007:21). Even though it is often presented “in terms of phases that must culminate with successful incorporation into the host culture” (Bhatia and Ram 2009:140), different pressures to “integrate” can apply to different categories of individuals. In order to “assess” e.g. immigrants’ integration, what is now criticized as universal, linear models and theories have been developed and used in both politics and research5. The idea that integration can be analyzed in terms of success or failure in “learning to read the culture’s basic text and making it one’s own” (Fay 1996:60) is presented increasingly as being flawed as the concept of culture, which is often an empty signifier, is a problematic one (cf. Philips 2010, Dervin 2011). Many scholars are now urging us to look at migration from an anti-culturalist point of view, i.e. uncritical and systematic discourses on culture. Linked to this issue – and in relation to the focus of this article – is the question of the boundary between religion and culture: is religion part of culture or is it produced by culture (or vice versa)? Is it possible to tell where and if this boundary exists?

The overemphasis on culture and religion overlooks the fact that integration is also a psychological concept which is heavily linked not only to ideology and political beliefs but also to the doxa (“the common sense”) conveyed, amongst others, by the media. In his study on the “integration” of Indian scholars in the USA, Bhatia (2007) shows that feelings and expressions of psychological integration can differ overtime as they depend on who is judging whether somebody is considered as integrated or not: an observer, a member of the host/home society or the actor himself. This is an important point as it pinpoints a major potential difference between macro-politics (governmental/state levels) and micro-politics of multiculturalism.

Another important element in reviewing the concept of integration is contained in Hermans and Kempen’s 1998 idea that “rather than thinking of immigrants as moving in a linear trajectory from culture A to culture B they suggest we think of cultures as ‘moving and mixing’” (Bhatia and Ram 2001:2). For Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2010:87), in our global multicultural worlds, integration and ‘accluturation’ have become extremely flexible: “in the past immigrants had to choose between two overall monocultural settings, now they navigate between two or more multicultural environments”. Yet he admits that politics and the literature on migration and multiculturalism continue to focus on “the relationship between immigrants and the host country and national policy options” (id.:88). In other words, methodological nationalism or “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002:302, cf. Dervin 2011) still prevails in dealing with issues of integration.

We agree with these criticisms of integration but we believe that local multicultural politics can have an impact on the expression and construction of immigrants’ religious identity which needs to be explained at this stage by looking at the term ‘multiculturalism’ (Pieterse 2010). As such, multiculturalism can be defined in a variety of ways and mean everything or nothing at the same time (Fleras and Elliott 2002).
Levels of local multicultural politics

In order to better understand the argument that multicultural politics can serve as a mean of “governing the others” or of allowing others to govern themselves, Labelle, Rocher and Antonius’ three level analytical distinction can be used (2009:99). They argue that in current studies of multiculturalism, these levels of analysis are too often confused: 1) multiculturalism as a political philosophy, which puts into question the classical postulates of the affiliation to a Nation State which is replaced by the pluricultural notion of citizenship, 2) the sum of juridical, political and institutional systems that recognize diversity and 3) multiculturalism as a strict demographic fact. These different approaches to multiculturalism can be used in state policies and thus lead to different positioning of immigrants and minorities in societies.

Let’s take the case of Finland to illustrate. In spite of the State’s positive attitude towards cultural pluralism, multiculturalism has, most of the time, been analysed as a pure democratic fact (see Sakaranaho 2006:53). Compared to other European and Nordic countries, the fact that there has been few immigrants in Finland has triggered a popular understanding and representation of Finland as a “homogeneous” nation (Tuori 2007, Saukkonen and Pyykkönen 2008) and thus multiculturalism as “an element that comes from outside of Finnish society” (Clarke 1999:36). This means that pluralism as a philosophical notion is linked solely to the plurality of cultures or religions from immigration, not to the recognition of inner pluralism of traditions, cultures, etc. (see Lefebvre 2010:90). This is reflected also in Finland’s multicultural politics which, after the early 2000s, has concentrated mainly on instrumental principals that combine the integration of individuals into society with collective rights of communities to maintain their own culture (see Saukkonen and Pyykkönen 2008, Act on the integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 493/1999 section 2). Belonging to a recognised and accepted ethnic or cultural community is thus considered to be a benefit in the integration process of the individual (see Ministry of Labour 2002:91). The question of the domination of collective rights versus individual rights could find its origins in the misleading representations of the notion of “culture”, which can serve for sacrificing the rights and interests of individuals to the preference of a cultural group (Phillips 2007:72). As such, collective right based multicultural policies can produce discourses of ethnic and religious communities as stable by nature, and lead to stereotypization of these communities and exclusion of global, hybrid and “in-between” identities (see Khan 2002:125-127). On the other hand, these policies don’t really take into account the multiple personal reasons why immigrants have left their home country in the first place (e.g. “immigrants” versus “refugees”).

Unlike Finland, ‘Canadian multiculturalism’ is usually approached through Labelle et al.’s first or second levels of analysis. Multiculturalism has been institutionalized in the Federation since 1971 and implanted in the legislation by the 1988 law of multiculturalism (Labelle et al. 2009). Multicultural ethos and cultural diversity, cross-cultural understanding and harmonious cultural coexistence have been central components of the Canadian political culture and public philosophies which have shaped public discourses, policies and programs during the recent decades (Garcea 2004). In Québec, the relation between unity and particularities is ‘governed’ under the double influence of two legal traditions, the French laïcité and the Canadian common law from which Québec’s interculturalism has emerged as the multicultural philosophy and politics (Lefebvre 2010:93). However, interculturalism as an integration policy has never been
fully, officially defined by the Québec government, although its underlying principles were formulated long ago (Bouchard and Taylor 2008). It is often linked to the idea that Québec represents a nation of French cultural minority to whom integration can represent a condition for its development or even survival. This is contrary to Canadian cultural relativism that does not impose any official culture (Potvin et al. 2007:20-22). Scholars have defined interculturalism as seeking to reconcile ethnocultural diversity with the continuity of the French-speaking Quebecers, and to protect their rights - all in keeping with the liberal tradition (ibid.).

Lately, wider political and academic debates have emerged about the political division between interculturalism (Québec) and multiculturalism (Canada) (Nugent 2006). Negative points, such as fragmentation and atomization, have been attached to Canadian multiculturalism while unification and dialogue are said to characterise Québec’s interculturalism. Nevertheless, through political terms, Canadian and Québec’s governmental approaches to pluralism can be seen as very similar, as both aim to balance individual rights, cultural accommodations, and social cohesion (ibid.). Even though Québec’s interculturalism and Canadian multiculturalism are alike in terms of objectives and conceptual evolution, Québec continues to elaborate its own development of diversity management starting from the representation of its political community as one nation within the Federation (Labelle et al. 2009:112-113, Kymlicka 2001:280-284, Nugent 2006).

**Religion and multicultural politics**

The Canadian constitutional plan from 1867 limits the privileged status of religion to education (Lefebvre 2010). No state religion or collaboration with religions are mentioned but can be found in some provincial documents (Lefebvre 2010). Even if the preamble to the revised Constitution Act 1982 recognises the supremacy of God, there is no jurisprudence or juridical impact with it (ibid.). Conversely the Finnish Constitution (1999) recognizes the privileged status of Lutheran churches as it states that provisions on the organisation and administration of the Evangelic Lutheran Church are laid down in the Church Act (ibid.). As such, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has an independent position towards the state in terms of public administration. Yet it cooperates with it on many and varied matters.

The distinction between religion and culture remains a burning issue as stated before. It is important to draw this line as religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitutions of Canada and Finland and reinforced by other national legislation (Freedom of religion Acts (1922, 2003) in Finland and La Charte des droits et libertés de la personne in Québec (1975/1976)). This puts religion legally in a superior position compared to other “cultural” aspects. Nevertheless, for example in Québec, the jurisprudence of reasonable accommodations aims at treating cultural and religious differences, yet it does not explicitly make a difference between these two concepts. In reality, many of the requests for reasonable accommodations were related one way or another to religious communities (e.g. Muslims or Orthodox Jews wishing to take a driving license test with a same sex examiner, Muslim prayers and menu adjustment asked in a sugarhouse, certified kosher food, wearing kirpan or headscarves at schools, etc. (Bouchard and Taylor 2008)). But a problem can occur when it comes to defining religion. Anne Saris (2010) notes that in general the following typology of approaches to religion can be found in juridical or
governmental texts: religion is often treated through its metaphysical aspect (belief), communitarian aspect (identity and belonging) and normative aspect (way of life). In terms of reasonable accommodations in Canada and Québec, religion ought to be treated as a subjective matter (versus objective and normative) based on sincerity of convictions (ibid.) (see the Supreme Court of Canada Syndicat Northcrest c. Amselem [2004]).

**Digital technologies of the self: constructing a Muslim migrant identity**

Throughout the 20th century, Muslim thinkers have been redefining what they consider to be “pristine Islam” (Haddad and Lummis 1987:20). This has happened by attempting to crystallize the faith into its simple and basic components by removing the accretions of centuries of commentary and dogmatic formulation and stressing what these thinkers understand to be the essential rational nature of Man (ibid.). In this growing literature, Man is seen as a representative of God placed on earth to care for it and thus is accountable for his own behaviours. Muslim thinkers try not to say that humankind in this understanding is independent of the ultimate authority of God, but rather that humans have the responsibility to choose and implement a moral and righteous life in obedience to God’s commandments (ibid.).

In this context Foucauldian technologies of the self have been put forward as means that individuals can use to reach this end (see e.g. Christiansen 2003, Nilan et al. 2007, Rahbari 2000). For example, in her study on Moroccan women’s pietistic groups, Christiansen (2003) showed how Islamic activism (i.e. active participation in religious activities) is characterized by a completely modern preoccupation: the search for authenticity. As a result, the individual Muslim woman structures and schedules her everyday life around religious obligations and activities in order to make the most of it. In this way, technologies of the self are relevant for members of pietist groups aiming at practicing Islam as correctly as possible, as they attempt to approach a certain ideal of the Muslim Woman. For Christiansen, interestingly, the self developed in Islamic activism appears to be coherent and strongly felt, rather than composite or fluid, as is often described when e.g. scholars talk about postmodern identity (ibid.).

Questions of identities cannot be separated from the idea of technologies of the self. Most researchers have now moved away from transcendentalist concepts of identity and dispelled the idea that identity is a given or an artefact (Cooper and Rowan 1999, Abbas and Dervin 2009, Dervin 2009). However, we suggest that identity is not “free-floating” (we all have a limitless freedom to be who we want to be) as we need to bear in mind that many elements external to the self represent a “coercive force” on identity construction and may thus orientate the self towards an undesirable/unstable identity (Brubaker & Cooper 2000, 1). In the case of Muslim immigrants for instance that would be negative representations on Islam developed since e.g. 9/11. Though (re-)inventions, confessions and multiple identifications are made easy online, certain practices of digital technologies of the self can also serve as a platform for the building up and strengthening of “solid identities” (Bauman 2004). Hermans (2004:315) asserts that the internet has the potential to reduce identity and rid it off its (potential) complexity.

Our previous study on the use of technologies of the Self by immigrants (Dervin and Riikonen 2009) examined taking care of oneself by means of podcasting (‘oral blogs’). We found out that podcasts contribute to their authors’ virtually constructed identities as they become showcases of
the self. This article is based on the idea that another kind of interactive technology or techniques of the self, discussion forums, can offer Muslim immigrants means to shape their religious self in ‘host societies’. The following case studies will help to illustrate.

Forging Muslim immigrants’ self/selves: case studies

The following analysis is based on two websites (one about Finland, one about Québec), which serve as discussion forums. Three different topics related to shaping Muslim self/selves are examined: 1. asking for guidelines on the difficulties a Muslim migrant would face in the two Non-Muslim societies 2. the proper way of living an Islamic life in non-Muslim societies and 3. relationships with other Muslims. A few words about the websites:

LamImmigrant.com is a discussion forum based website created in 2008 and aimed at Muslim immigrants arriving and settling in Canada. The website is maintained by RubyDo, a veiled Muslim woman as is seen in her profile picture. She defines the objective of the website as “to share some tips, thoughts and sometimes some fun to make it easy for immigrant to start their life in Canada”. Despite the use of the English language (and sometimes Arabic) most of the posted information concerns mainly Muslim life in French-speaking Montreal in Québec. The website is free to read and consult but requires registration for posting messages and opinions. In March 2011 there were approximately 70 posts (posted mainly between 2008 and 2009) - which is not a great amount when compared to the hundreds or even thousands of posts published in various international Muslim discussion forums. The main reason why this website has caught our attention is the fact that it is addressed especially to Muslim immigrants coming to/in Canada and it contains practical information about starting a new life in the new ‘host society’.

Tulevaisuus.org (trans. Future.org) is a Finnish language based Muslim website, which includes a variety of information about Islam and Muslim life: “Islamin perusteet” (Basics of Islam), “Ajankohtaista” (News), “Uusille muslimeille” (For new Muslims), “Videot ja luennot” (Videos and lectures), “Koraani” (Qur’an), “Mediakirjasto” (Media library). These discussion forums are free to read, but require registration for posting. The webmaster(s) are/is not explicitly mentioned but forum administrators can be traced in some posts, as in “Islam Suomessa” (Islam in Finland) the forum administrator is called ‘Mikael’. The discussion forum is divided into “Islam foorumi” (Islam forum) and “Muut aiheet” (Other subjects). The forum of interest here is “Islam Suomessa”. It is included in the Islam forum and contains 216 discussion topics and 2236 messages (April 2011). It should be noted that we could not find a Finnish Muslim webpage addressed only to Muslim immigrants in Finnish nor in English.

Following this short introduction to the forums it is easy to see how different they are. While LamImmigrant is clearly devoted to Muslim immigrants and has a more international profile, Tulevaisuus opens discussions to any Muslim, be she/he an immigrant or not, mainly through the Finnish language. As we are working with discussion forums, we face the issue of anonymity and thus the impossibility to say if the forumers are 1. real immigrants and 2. Muslims or even located in one specific geographical space (Finland or Québec). Aware of these problems, we believe that analysing these two forums can still provide some interesting information on religious selves, multicultural politics and views on integration, especially as our study is
positioned within a constructionist approach to the Self and identity and is not interested in being exhaustive.

The value of multiculturalism: other immigrants as integrative facilitators?

Our analysis of the data shows that the potential impact of local multicultural politics can be identifiable first and foremost when the forumers talk about other immigrants. No official voices related to the idea of multiculturalism (authorities, politicians, NGOs…) are actually mentioned in the data.

In the iamimmigrant.com forum several categories are devoted to the theme of integration. In the post *Immigrant’s everyday life in Montreal*, multiculturalism (as a demographic fact, cf. supra the analytical levels of multicultural politics) is lauded: “one of the richness of Montreal is the multi-culture value”. According to the author of the post, this adds to the migration experience and triggers harmony:

*One of the richness of Montreal is the multi-culture value. It adds a lot to the city. All immigrants work on harmony to build the city. (...)I see this every day at work and it touched me deeply when I was working on a university group project; we were five with different backgrounds and cultures, China, Morocco, Romania, Québec and Egypt. Each has his way of thinking and brilliant ideas. (...) I was impressed by the different view that each has in the same point and the great values we had by the end of the project.*

We have a clear celebration of the positive effects of multiculturalism as a demographic fact here: “it adds a lot to the city”, “it touched me deeply”, “each has his way of thinking and brilliant ideas”... The way multiculturalism is conceived of is also clearly dependent on the fuzzy concept of culture (“we were five with different backgrounds and cultures”) and thus differentialism. Note that the mentioned context (higher education) reveals that the author of the post lives in a somewhat privileged context (which is not shared by all immigrants to Québec)

All in all the picture of other immigrants in the post appears to be optimistic and suggests the idea that they can be useful facilitators for integration. Another post proposes that when a Muslim immigrant feels lonely, trying to find immigrant friends might help them to feel good. She starts her post by warning the readers that “Knowing people is not hard but getting friends is VERY HARD”. She then dichotomizes Quebecers and immigrants. Immigrants are “in general more interactive with you than Québécois because they face the same what you face and will respond to you” while Québécois, though they are described as “kind and nice”, “there is always a barrier that will prevent you to interact with some of them. There is always a limit for the friendship. They are very kind, helpful and everything but it is not common to find Québécois who accept you as a friend, invite you home and have a deep relation.” As such ‘locality’ (as represented by Québécois) does not appear as facilitating integration (understood as having acquaintances and contacts here). She goes on asserting that “Having friends immigrants from a different culture and nationalities than yours is something veryyyyyy positive. You will learn new stuff, different way of thinking, new fun ways. You will enjoy it really. It will add a depth to your personality”.

8
The tulevaisuus.org forum differs from the other set of data as no explicit discussion on immigrant Muslims arriving in Finland or multiculturalism was traced. One topic of discussion is aimed at Muslim immigrants: “Muslimi maahamuttajille tietoa/linkkejä” (Information/links for Muslim immigrants), but it remains with no contributions. This is why no clear conclusion can be drawn as to whether multiculturalism in Finnish society is seen as a purely demographic fact, or if the integration of Muslim immigrants to Finnish society is an important issue. However the dichotomy between the ‘host society’ and immigrants appears from time to time in tulevaisuus.org. In what follows a Finnish Muslim refers to this issue in relation to one specific mosque:

(...) Onko tarkoitettu jollekin tietylle kansallisuudelle, vai voiko peruspulliainen suomalainen mennä tuonne haistelemaan tunnelmaa? Millä kielellä tuolla toimitaan? Tai mikä pk-seudun moskeijoista olisi suositeltavin "aloittelijalle”?(...) Is it meant for some specific nationality or can this kind of basic Finn go there to smell the atmosphere? What language is used there? Or which of the mosques in the capital area are the most recommended for “beginners”?

As we can see, there seems to be some hesitation and prudence in the dichotomization of Finns and other Muslims (maybe even some feeling of inferiority?). Also the absence of English language based discussions under the rubric Islam Suomessa (Islam in Finland) can make English speaking immigrants invisible. For example, the administrator (Mikael) offers some discussion topics in English such as “Islam Chat # islam-finland” and “Islam and Muslims in Finland” which are especially addressed to “non-Finnish speaking visitors” in order to talk about Muslims and Islam in Finland in English. These suggested discussions are located at the beginning of the forum and remain without answers. This could suggest some sort of differentialism between Finnish and Immigrant Muslims. One can thus also ask if the limited presence of English speaking Muslims in Finland (or Finnish Muslims who speak English) is an explanation, but also if the potentially low/limited technological knowledge/interest of some Muslim immigrants doesn’t allow them to use internet forums in order to discuss religious matters. Or simply because they have no wish to do so.

The kind of barrier between Finnish and Immigrant Muslims can also be found from the immigrants’ side as is indicated in one Moroccan Muslim’s comment:

olen marokolainen muslimi asun marakechissa haluaisin olla teidan ystävä . (I am a Moroccan Muslim I live in Marrakesh I would like to be your friend) so please forgive me i didnt speak finnish language for long time so excuse me if I write mixed language finnish and english im verry happy that i find muslims from finland elika voin nyt muistaa suomen kieltä ja tehdä muslimin ystavia. (so I can now remember Finnish language and make Muslim friends) please write to me.

This could also suggest a certain feeling of prudence (or inferiority?) when it comes to approaching Finnish Muslims. This time the feeling might be linked to the Finnish language, which in this post can be seen as a barrier between Finnish and immigrant Muslims.

The dichotomization and the kind of inferior feeling can also be felt between “born in Muslim families” and “converted or ‘returner’ Muslims”, and, for example, the skin colour. One author philosophizes with the idea:

muslimiperheeseen syntynyt kasvaa tähän uskontoon,näkee sen harjoittamista päivittäin,oppii vanhemmilta,sisaruksilta,suvulta... palannut,kuten minä tahkoaa ja tunne on tämä (pääätä
seinään lyövät hymiöt) se on vaan vaikeampi käyttää hijabia, oppia koraania yksin, olla yksin uskon kanssa... en tarkoita, etteikö synty musmillakin olisi ongelma (...), mutta on se vaikeampaa kun syntynyt erilaisiin sosiaalisiiin ympyröihin ja uskoon, me palanneet olemme kuin vauvoja aluksi... (...) ja minusta tuntuu että kyllä tummempi ihoisen siskon pidetään luonnollisempana olla muslimi. nämä nyt pohjautuvat vain kokemukseeni, ei ole mikään tuleen kirjoitettu totuus, vaan mitä tuntuu...

When born in a Muslim family one grows up within the religion, sees its practice every day, learns from parents, brothers and sisters and from relatives... returned, like me, push hard and the feeling is this (smiley hits the head to the wall) it is just more difficult to use the hijab, learn the Qur’an alone, to be alone with the faith... I don’t mean that born as a Muslim wouldn’t have problems (...) but it is harder when born in a different social surrounding and faith, we returnees are like babies first..., (...) and I feel like it is seen as more natural when a darker sister is a Muslim. This is based only on my experience, it is not an absolute truth, only what I feel...)

In conclusion, we can point out that the dichotomization of Finnish and immigrant Muslims is present in the analysed discussion forum and that it can lead to the view of multiculturalism as a pure demographic fact but also to the idea of differentialism “within”. The interesting side here is that the multicultural politics of the two societies under scrutiny (Finland, Québec) seem to participate directly in the self expression and construction of these people, whether they are immigrants or not.

**Living an ‘authentic’ Muslim daily life**

The canonical definition of integration in multicultural politics that we criticized earlier (2.) asserts that immigrants are automatically supposed to or led to keep their own culture in order to better integrate in the ‘host society’, should their culture be “compatible” with it. In our view, this question becomes more accurate when we deal with the politics of religion and the possibility to practice it (or not) as freedom of religion is granted by the constitution and national legislations. This leads to the question of the possibility to achieve or maintain an “authentic religious life” from its normative aspects, as not all religions can remain in the private personal sphere and also the relation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis differs. For example, in Islam one category of behavior (cf. infra) distinguishes the forbidden (haram) and permitted (halal) behaviors according to Islamic law mostly in relation to foodstuff such as meat (Pratt 2005:93).

In immigrant 16 categories (15 in English and one in Arabic) are proposed to support immigrants in this task. The given information does not only relate to the topic of religion (“halal food”, “Muslim resources”), but it also proposes more general topics on immigrant life (“before landing”, “credit cards and banks”, “Positive thinking”). A lot of the questions and suggestions that are posted relate to what to do to live and continue experiencing an ‘authentic’ Muslim daily life in Canada.

In the category Before Landing, a post lists 11 things to bring to Canada. It is interesting to see how religious elements are mixed with daily ‘practical’ elements – but also how the latter outnumber the religious (9 vs. 2). The religious effects include: “worship and prayer stuff” (an
Alfagr Islamic alarm clock which plays the call for prayer, prayer carpets) and “veils”. On the other hand, bed stuff (pillow covers, blankets), luffa (a sponge), a detergent (Detol)… are recommended.

In the category Halal Food on the same website posts entitled “Where to find Halal & Middle East Food”, “Are Muslims Eating Halal in Canada?”, “Halal Cheese and yogurt”, “Halal Restaurants” and “Pig-Pork names” are found. Some posts provide the reader with addresses in Québec where they can obtain Halal food (supermarkets, restaurants…). All in all the posts in this category do not include any personal discussion about the “right or wrong” ways of being Muslim but they act more like technologies which lead individuals to a ‘right’ Islamic way of living. Some posts show that the immigrants are aware of the potential contradiction between the halal behaviour and living in Québec:

*The only negative here is Alcohol and food but once they know your regulation in having Halal food and no alcohol they respect that. I have a good friend, she is very sweet. She used to bring Halal chicken for me or have something vegetarian/fish for me when I visit her. we have great time together and high communication level. I really love her.*

Advice is also given on the care that one should take when buying food: “Make sure to read the ingredients before buying because companies change the components from time to time like Kraft cheese before they had the kosher symbol and now I do not notice it on their products”.

As to pork, the website provides a full description of pig cuts so that readers can check food description.

The author concludes this description with these words of advice, which tell the reader that faith can be stronger than experiences or that it can help go through difficult ones: “After all, the most important thing in my opinion is that you say remember to say “besm Allah” (in the name of God) before you eat just in case you was mistaken in whatever you eat”. One episode recounted by the author – which is not contextualised: is the narrator in a Muslim shop? – actually shows that it can be difficult to ‘trust’ locality for religious purposes:

*One day, I went to a store who has a big label on his window saying HALAL. I usually buy without making any investigations as long as it is written Halal. I don’t know why that day I decided to ask “is this chicken cut by neck and you said bismAllah when you cut it? ” He said “no, Halal means you just say bismAllah and eat”!!!!! (...) Then I really became very picky when it comes to eating in Halal restaurants or buying from Halal stores.*

In the Finnish data some posts also pay attention to Halal food. The following discussion is about sweets and gelatine in them:

*Eniten kaipaan vaahdonamuja ja nallekarkkeja joita en koskaan ole tavannut ilman sika-liivatettu, olen käsitännyt ett halal versio tehdään kala-liivatteesta. Vaikuttaako se makuun jotkin? (Most of all I miss marshmallow sweets and gummi bears that I have never found without pork based gelatine, I understand that the Halal version is made with fish based gelatine. Does it affect the taste somehow?)

We can assume that the post is by a Muslim convert as she/he talks about ‘missing’ something known before. This question leads to a long discussion in the forum about how difficult it is to know if the food in Finnish stores is Halal (allowed to Muslims) or not. As the author asks about
the use of pork based gelatine in her favourite sweets, other participants point out many other products that might include pork based ingredients such as margarine, cream cheese spread, turkey sausages, etc. as, according to one author, pork skin based gelatine is the less expensive way to do it.

In addition, Muslims in Finland can also confront the same kind of problems concerning the ‘trust’ of locality as in our Québec example pointed out. One author asserted that when she asked about the “righteousness” of Halal labelled product - was the meat really prepared the halal-way? - she got the answer that the enterprise owner is Muslim, nothing more.

Difficulties other than finding Halal meat are mentioned in the Finnish data. Under the category of Kysymyksiä muslimeille (Questions for Muslims) topics include many accurate questions in relation to living an authentic Muslim life: “Joulun vietto suomalaisissa kouluissa” (celebrating Christmas in Finnish schools), “Äidit miten saatte rukousrauhan” (Mums, how do you get the peace for praying?), “Onko kukaan onnistunut hihtiämään abayan ja niqabin kanssa?” (Has someone managed to ski with abaya and niqab?), “rommi-aromi” (Aroma of Rum).

All in all, the posts in both forums show the difficulties that Muslims face when they want to live their Muslim life in a (new) ‘non-Muslim majority society’. In the Finnish data it is clear that this problematic does not just concern immigrant Muslims but also converts. In this kind of environment Muslim identity might have to be ‘solidified’ as it can be challenged by non-Muslim ‘host society’.

**Relationships with other Muslims (immigrants and reverters)**

As the websites are dedicated to Muslims, it is normal that a lot of data deal with how to relate to other Muslims in the ‘host country’.

On the Quebec website several posts (yet a minority) deal directly with how to practise Islam in Canada and what is expected of Muslims. In one post, it is suggested that “Having friends Muslims is very important”:

*You are in Canada, you do not hear any call for prayer and at a moment you want somebody like you to push you up a higher level or Eman⁷ or even to make u more solid on your religion level. Somebody like you to talk with, who understands your pains from eye contact like these solid friends you left in your country. (...) Having muslim friends from your culture is tricky a bit. Just do your best to look for people POSITIVE and PRACTICING ISLAM.*

A list of associations and list servers is then provided to help readers find Muslim friends. Note that the author talks about Muslim friends not Muslim migrant friends.

In the following post, the author explains that one of the duties of Muslim immigrants is to do something for Islam in Canada, i.e. support other Muslims:

*One of the good thing a Muslim immigrant need to consider while living in Canada is to do something for Islam. Adding a value as a Muslim can have many ways, one of these ways is to support and help new Muslim reverters. (...) You can find them in islamic events, in the prayer rooms, masjeds, in eftar⁸ of Ramadan done my the universities, in conferences, in the streets. Take the initiation and do the step to know them and support them. (...) They ask you things, and*
not everything that you know so you go search and that’s how you increase your knowledge in the religion, they encourage you to go deep and deep in Islam.

To the author, this relationship with other Muslims and especially converts can help immigrants become more Muslim, i.e. reinforce their Muslim identity.

In tulevaisuuks.org and especially under the rubric “Islam Suomessa” (Islam in Finland) information about Islamic activities in Finland is provided, usually without distinguishing immigrant Muslims and Muslims in general. The forum proposes several discussions on mosques in Finland, Arabic language courses, etc. Sometimes the discussion revolves around Finnish Muslims and their presence in mosques. This is often linked to the question of language: Are there people who speak Finnish? “Melkein jokaisessa moskeijassa helsingissä on suomalaisia käännönpäälliköitä ja erinomaisesti suomenkieltä osaavia jotka voivat toimia tulkkina”. (Almost in every mosque in Helsinki there are Finnish converts or those who speak excellent Finnish and can serve as translators).

What is interesting is that one discussion topic includes a survey about “Are you a lonely Muslim?”. The administrator has specified in a separate post that loneliness here is linked to “returned Muslims”. He even asks participants to say if they have found Muslim friends after their conversion. According to the survey (61 answers until April 2011), the majority has answered that they are not alone (26 %), whereas 16 % have answered yes, they haven’t found any close friends, and another 16 % said a little. Some of the comments left about the topic dealt with the ‘moral’ loneliness in a non-Muslim society, while other comments mention the difficulties to find other Muslims to share thoughts and words:

Minulla on ihan kivasti muslimitutuja, joiden kanssa joskus tavataan, mutta se ei täytä sitä kaipuuta saada oikea sydäntästävän muslimista. (I know quite many Muslims with whom we meet sometimes but it doesn’t fulfil the longing to get a real Muslim soul mate.)

En tunne itseäni yksinäiseksi muslimiksi vaikkei muslimi-ystäviä olekaan...eihän sillä ole välttää onko ystävää muslimia vai ei kunhan "kunnollinen". (I don’t feel myself as a lonely Muslim even though I don’t have Muslim friends… it doesn’t matter if the friend is Muslim if she/he is “correct”).

(...) Loppujen lopuksi alkaa loppua tahto edes yrittää saada uusia kaveria, ei enää vaan usko mahdollisuuksemaa... Ja asun kaupungissa, missä asuu paljon muslimeja sekä itse kaupungissa että lähikaupungeissa. (In the end I start to feel that I am losing my will even to try to get new friends, cannot believe anymore in my possibilities… And I live in a city where a lot of Muslims live, in the city itself and in the near cities.)

As these answers show, the experiences of being a Muslim can vary depending on the perspective (personal/communal). Also the need to interact (virtually or face-to-face) and the “affirmation” for this identity vary a lot according to personal experiences. What is remarkable is that only one of the posts claims that the importance of a friend is not in his/her “Muslim-ness” but his/her “correctness”. This could demonstrate the need to strengthen the (new) Muslim identity through other Muslims.
Conclusion

The aim of this study was to compare the local multicultural politics in Finland and in Québec and to see how Muslim religious identity construction through digital technologies can reflect and challenge integration in these two contexts. Some traces of official discourses on multiculturalism were found in the data though not consistently. Even though we wouldn’t risk any generalizations on the impact of official multicultural politics on Muslim identity, the two different corpora, taken from what we have qualified as digital technologies of the self, have provided us with hints at the strategies used by Muslim migrants (and other Muslims in the case of Finland) to craft a Muslim self in non-Muslim societies. These strategies include the will to qualify the behaviour between halal and haram (permitted and forbidden by Islamic law) and the importance of relations with other Muslims. It seems that the analysed web pages can trigger a consciousness of the “certain authenticity of Muslim life” for Muslims, but also guide Muslims and Muslim immigrants to a better and “correctly practiced” Islam and help them to strip everyday life of elements which are disturbing the essential obligations of Muslims in the new host country. This is especially reflected in the “immigrant survival” topics presented on the websites.

In both forums, it is very difficult to say whether those participating in the discussions are representatives of the Muslim migrant population or even of the Muslim population in general in Québec and in Finland. The Finnish discussion forum opened other perspectives for us as the authors were mainly converted Finnish Muslims. First of all it shows that the issue of integration concerns not only immigrants, but also others. As international mobility makes religious affiliations more mobile globally and produce new affiliations, the question of integration can also impact on converted believers from the host society who might want to ‘fit in’ with the immigrant faith based communities in order to “strengthen their new identity” (as expressed in a forum). This gives us another totally different perspective on the notion of integration – a concept that we have proposed to criticise in reference to recent scientific discussions. The Finnish data has also pointed at the fact that when working on religion (esp. Islam) we need to beware of the fact that a certain religious identity doesn’t automatically mean a migrant or a “foreign” identity.

All in all, Foucauldian ‘governmentality’ and the concept of ‘technologies of the Self’ applied in its digital form here have opened up an interesting way to explore the construction of the religious self among Muslims in two contexts, Finland and Québec. They have also allowed us to look at the concept of integration in a critical manner. It would be interesting to examine in the future how the official discourses of multicultural politics affect Muslim identification and integration at a local level. As the analysis demonstrates, integration within religious communities cannot be seen as a linear process as religious affiliation is not always linked to any specific ethnicity or culture. Anyone – not just immigrants – can belong to these groups. Foucauldian technologies of the Self could thus expose a wider understanding of the identity work of those who try to ‘integrate’ within a religion. They could also help researchers to grasp the dangers of ‘imposing’ multicultural politics or a strict immobile division between the private and the public spheres in secular societies.
Bibliography


---

i “Religion may be extinct in nine nations, study says” BBC 22.3.2011 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12811197]
ii cf. the special issue on the topic in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations 2009/33 and Bhatia & Ram’s critique of Berry and his colleagues.
iii All translations from Finnish to English in parenthesis are made by authors.
iv The quotes are verbatim and haven’t been corrected.
However, the majority of immigrants who arrive in Québec are “selected” immigrants (75.6 % in 2009) who fall within the economical category (69.7 % in 2009), while very few have a refugee status (8.2 % in 2009) (Ministère de l’Immigration et des Communautés culturelles, 2010).

Eman or Iman: faith or believe, particularly the idea of ‘right belief’ by virtue of being Muslim (Pratt 2005: 237)

Eftar or Iftar: evening meal that breaks the fasting during Ramadan.