

*Global Migration Challenges Speaker Series*

*The Global Migration Challenges series offers accessible, policy-focused conversations with leading experts, civil society, and practitioners. The series is presented with support from Immigration, Refugees, & Citizenship Canada, and the Canada Research Chair in Global Migration.*

*This report was prepared by students from the Lab's Graduate Student Research Initiative. For more information please email: [migration.munkschool@utoronto.ca](mailto:migration.munkschool@utoronto.ca).*

**Report 4**

**A Religion/Migration Nexus? Faith Groups, Immigration Policy, and Public Opinion in Canada**

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Prepared by: Fatima Niri, Curt Wackett

**Participants:**

**Shachi Kurl:** Executive Director of the Angus Reid Institute

**Geoffrey Cameron** (MPhil, PhD): Director of Public Affairs for the Baha'i Community of Canada, a Research Associate with the Global Migration Lab, and he teaches at McMaster University

**Sadia Rafiquddan:** freelance writer, broadcaster and photographer focusing on human rights stories (CBC, Ferst Digital Inc., Philanthropic Foundations Canada, Hacking Health, Apathy is Boring)

**Discussant:**

**Michael Donnelly:** Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy

Issue

This discussion examined how religion shapes migration and vice versa: How have faith groups influenced immigration patterns and policy? How is immigration changing religion in a secular Canadian society? And what do Indigenous experiences of displacement tell us about popular narratives of welcome?

Immigration to Canada has progressively changed the religious composition of the country and stimulated a number of heated policy debates around questions of citizenship and belonging. Religious groups have also long been some of the most vocal advocates for family migration and refugee resettlement.

### Discussion Summary

Shachi spoke to the idea of the religion-migration Nexus and the progression of immigration policy and public opinion in Canada. Thematically throughout her talk, Shachi described how religion and faith communities strengthen Canadian values such as equality and human rights. Against this mosaic, Shachi distinguished how Canadian public opinion has started to take on populist rhetoric. She illustrated how Canadian narratives and conversations around migration do not deconstruct what kind of immigrant Canada should focus on. Moreover, she described that these conversations rarely distinguish between the different types of migrants, causing public opinion to be guided by false assumptions. Shachi noted that since the change in government Canada has ‘aggressively’ increased immigrant acceptance. With the recognition that Canadian birth rates are too low, and that immigrants strengthen our workforce and create our tax base, Canada is supposed to have 300,000 settlers by 2030. Shachi also shared data from Reid Institute surveys, exemplifying how religious/faith groups provide newcomers with a social network, improve immigrant’s mental health, and ease their transition to Canada through language assistance and help finding work. Moreover, Shachi discussed the idea that faith-based upbringing helps shape citizenship and strengthen Canadian values. When asked a question by the moderator on the intersection between religion, public policy and public opinion’s effect on immigration Shashi provided a lot of useful insight on the need to dissect our pre-existing assumptions and how they contribute to the overall immigration narrative.

Dr. Cameron discussed the importance of religion in private sponsorship in Canada. He asked important questions about the future of refugee sponsorship such as how can the religious-secular divide be bridged, who will be doing this sponsorship in the future and will it later become family reunification by another name? Using the political religion and institutional religion dichotomy he was able to expose the current happenings around the issue. Political religion is considered an interest group that is used to advocate primarily in the public sphere and often adopts an adversarial relation to the government. An example of these types of groups is the Canadian Committee on Refugees, and Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America among others. While on the other hand, institutional religion is primarily oriented towards realizing its own internal goals (social, moral, ethical, spiritual), are occasionally brought into the relationship with government as internal goals intersect with government policy, making them more likely to adopt strategies of quiet politics, seeking direct institutional access to decision-making. An example is the Canadian Christian Council for the Resettlement for Refugees. By also going through the evolution of private sponsorship, found was the fact that policies were failing refugees, thus religious groups felt the need to take matters into

their own hands. Religious actors were the biggest lobbyists for taking in refugees from Europe – this was generally Christian leaders. When asked a question by the moderator on the intersection between religion, public policy and public opinion’s effect on immigration Dr. Cameron brought up the need to find ways private sponsorship will occur for those that are religiously unaffiliated will to avoid populism.

Sadia Rafiquddin started her presentation recounting her personal experiences as a muslim refugee from Pakistan and her parents’ experiencing fleeing the Ahmadi muslim minority community in 1990. Sadia spoke to the alienation she and her parents felt moving to Canada, losing their language and struggling with English, and finding meaningful work. Sadia mentioned that her personal understanding of what it felt like to lose one’s home inspired and shaped her life’s work to advocate for and engage with Indigenous communities. Her presentation detailed her story 3 week voyage with Innu Nation elder Elizabeth and her family. Sadia shared photos from the journey of the canvas tents they lived in during the trip, Elizabeth’s dogs, children, and husband Francis, as well as photos of the frozen lakes, forested mountains to illustrate the route of the journey. Sadia connected this trip with her personal experience of what it meant to be forced to leave one’s land without choice. She described the Indigenous experience as one that is exhausting, having to justify and explain what intergenerational trauma looks and feels like. Having received questioning from the moderator and audience, Sadia responded that the media needs to do a better job at teaching the rest of population about the different types of immigrants and the need for specificity in important conversations. She noted how misrepresentation and false beliefs only bring about heightened fear and further strengthen divisive narratives built upon “Us” vs. “Them”.

### Lessons Learned

Shachi noted through the data provided by the Angus Reid Institute, that most of immigrants to Canada are coming from countries entrenched in faith (i.e., very religious countries). She also highlighted public opinion surveys that exemplified how newcomers look to their faith communities often for both practical and spiritual comfort. 49% of respondents when asked, “to what extent if at all, was any religious or faith group involved in the following aspects of settling into life here in Canada?” responded that religious/faith groups were “somewhat/very involved in help getting a job/place to live/language assistance”. This implication for policy reinforces that religion and faith communities strengthen Canadian values such as equality and human rights. Dr. Cameron argued that an important directive for policymakers is to stimulate and develop Canada’s institutional capacity for Canada’s greater religions, establish new philanthropic organizations formed on a more secular humanist ethic to help those non-religiously affiliated. A critical question to consider is who is going to do refugee re-settlement in the future. Since 2/3 of immigrants Canada will be admitting in the next 3 years will be through private sponsorship (mainly in association with religious groups), Government Assisted Refugees and Blended Visa Office referred Refugees make up a small portion. Public

mobilization to get refugees through sponsorship is important, but if religious groups are struggling with resources and funding, or major crises make ongoing sponsorship complicated, there will be a gap that the government needs to fill. Therefore, Dr. Cameron suggests that in light of current migration policy being influenced by religion, religious actors and institutions, we must look at this with a degree of objectivity and study policy as a variable of continuing importance.

Sadia indicated that the existing narratives within public discourse have a real and impactful effect on policy decisions. Living in Quebec now, Sadia contended that similar narratives have arisen with the “Us vs. Them”, in that Quebec politicians have spent a lot of time developing rhetoric ‘about them’. This rhetoric is in reference to incoming immigrants that do not fit within associated ‘Quebec values’, and affected recent Quebec elections where Muslim hatred was ripe. In an interview with the panelists, they agreed that with reference to Quebec, religion and public opinion will change but not disappear. Religion has various implications as to how public opinion is formed, and in the short run is limiting how far democratic feeling can go. Therefore, in reference back to this exclusionary rhetoric, Sadia suggested that to work toward indigenous reconciliation people must look into their own backgrounds to see what they can do to assist with Indigenous issues. Although we may not be able to immediately change the populist rhetoric in Quebec, or upheave the socio-cultural barriers that initially alienate newcomers, “we can all play a part in reconciliation”.