

At The Corner of Crescent and Sainte-Catherine

by Shiraz Janjua

Mark Twain once quipped, “This is the first time I was ever in a city where you couldn’t throw a brick without breaking a church window. Yet I was told that you were going to build one more. I said, “The scheme is good, but where are you going to find room?’ They said, ‘We will build it on top of another church and use an elevator.’”

The American raconteur could have been describing a whitewashed city in southern Italy. Instead, his sardonic 1881 observation was a comment on what was, at the time, the largest city in Canada: Montreal.

And though Montreal has been surpassed in size by Toronto, and though the churches have remained constant long after Mark Twain moved on, a multitude of cultures in this cosmopolitan metropolis have arisen around the churches.

A hundred-foot tall metal cross stands atop Mount Royal, the mountain at the center of the island of Montreal and the source of that island’s name. Many of the city’s streets are named after sometimes obscure Catholic saints like Saint-Viateur and Saint-Sulpice.

In a city so inimically marked by a history of Catholicism, it might be a surprise to find a dynamic community of over 125,000 Muslims. But this isn’t Mark Twain’s city anymore.

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I'm sinking in the soft couch in Mohamed Fadil's living room. The sun breaks through the open window beside me. I'm drinking mint tea in a glass tinted with red and a riot of gold swirls. Steam rises from the glass and my fingers are singed against the edge. I rock the glass back and forth as it cools. The mishmash of mint leaves and cardamom at the bottom of the glass sways in the modest whirlpool I'm trying to create.

"This has to be the only place in the world where they're actually selling churches," jokes Mohamed, a 30-year-old Moroccan journalist in Montreal studying comparative religion at the Université de Montreal. He chuckles as he sits sinking in a white couch facing me, across from a tiny Ikea coffee table, square, plain.

I ask him what he thinks the difference is between his home country, Morocco, and Montreal.

"They're two completely different worlds," he tells me in his Arab-accented French. "Religion has such a strong social presence there. The religious blends into the social, the social into the religious." His hands swing back and forth emphatically. "There are no boundaries whereas here, well, you can see that religion is something people don't care about. It's very secular. It's a contradiction, because the province of Quebec was historically a very religious society. But now, nobody's talking about religion."

Mohamed might be right. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the province of Quebec and its largest city, Montreal, underwent a series of rapid changes and growth spurts. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s modernized and secularized the

traditional French Catholic fabric of the region's culture. The world's fair of Expo 67 and the Summer Olympics of 1976 opened Montreal up to the world, and brought in a huge influx of immigrants from around the globe. The swift changes also contributed to a rise in French nationalist sentiment and, with it, the threat of secession from Canada. But as the power of French nationalism wanes, at least politically, the city continues to grow.

Montreal today is an international city, host to such events as the Formula One Grand Prix and the Montreal International Jazz Festival, the largest music festival of its kind in the world. Its European flair places it firmly in the strata of the hippest cities in the world. In a ranking of the top cities in the world, swanky *Monocle* Magazine ranked the city 12th. *Forbes* Magazine ranked the city as the world's 10th cleanest. Its nightlife is renowned across Canada and regularly draws party-seekers from nearby Vermont and upstate New York. And depending on who you ask, Montreal is reputed to have more restaurants per capita than any other city in North America, except perhaps New York City.

According to the 2006 census, 3.6 million residents live in the Montreal metropolitan area, accounting for half of the province's population of 7.5 million. And though the majority of the population is French and nominally Christian, a stroll through the downtown streets will see how deeply diverse the city is, with Jews, blacks, Italians, South Asians, Arabs, Chinese, Latin Americans, and a host of other cultures and backgrounds all coming together, regardless of skin color, language, or religion.

But in the past year, religion has taken an unexpected and perhaps unwelcome presence on people’s lips around the city, and especially around the province. The vogue of questioning the role of religion in the public space, as well as the presence of Muslim minorities in liberal democracies, arrived in Quebec with all the subtlety of a typical media onslaught. This time, they called it a debate on “reasonable accommodation.”

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It was a sunny albeit cool August day. By 11 a.m. on that Saturday morning, the ball room of the Student Union Building of McGill University had filled up with about 100 concerned Muslims—it was a sunny Saturday morning, after all. As coffee and baklava were served at the back of the hall, Shaykh Salam Elmenyawi, chairman of the Muslim Council of Montreal, welcomed the crowd. He began by paraphrasing Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

“Democracy cannot survive without respecting minorities,” said Shaykh Elmenyawi, a vigorous, outspoken 58-year-old imam with a salt-and-pepper beard descending from his smiling, youthful face.

The conference he organized was meant to discuss the crisis surrounding “reasonable accommodation” in the province of Quebec.

The term originated in labor law to refer to the accommodation an employer would be required to make to cater to specific cultural or physical needs of employees. Yet through a series of events in Montreal and in the rest of the province, the term had been co-opted by media organizations in the province of

Quebec to describe the phenomenon of integration and the role of minorities in Quebec society.

The issue of minority rights has included a ruling on the legality of the Sikh kirpan ceremonial dagger. It has even included rulings on the transparency of windows of a YMCA building whose female aerobics classes offended a large community of Hasidic Jews.

Similar incidents have occurred around the world: the swearing-in of Minnesota senator Keith Ellison over a Qur'an instead of a Bible, and the British niqab row following comments made by politician Jack Straw.

While such controversies have mostly occurred far from home over the past few years, a series of events—all involving Muslims, all covered extensively by the media, and all occurring in Quebec within the span of less than six months—have inflamed public rhetoric and caught the rapidly growing Muslim community of Montreal off-guard.

In January 2007, the council of the rural town of Hérouxville, 70 miles northeast of Montreal, formulated a civic code prohibiting stoning, female genital mutilation, and face veils, among other things. The impetus for the new code had been the prospective arrival of “eventual immigrants.”

The international media were quick to descend on the farming community. French newspaper columnist Alain Dubuc described the code as “xenophobic.” Quebec Premier Jean Charest said that the Hérouxville case was an “isolated” one.

Then, in February, in the Montreal suburb of Laval, an 11-year-old soccer-playing girl named Asmahan Mansour was ejected from a match for wearing a hijab. Politicians and media commentators weighed in, and the issue even passed before FIFA, the international governing body of the sport of soccer. FIFA ultimately upheld the decision of the referee.

Later, a similar incident occurred when girls were barred from a tae kwon do competition. The Quebec Tae Kwon Do Federation claimed that the hijab was a safety risk. Similar arguments were made during the Asmahan Mansour incident.

During the campaign period preceding the Quebec provincial election of March 2007, another controversy began when editorialists and politicians demanded women wearing the niqab face veil remove their veils at the voting booth. To prevent public unrest, the province's chief electoral officer overruled a law permitting the niqab at the voting booth.

“This was an entirely fabricated crisis, without any consultation from the Muslim community,” said Shaykh Elmenyawī. “We never asked for this kind of accommodation. It was simply a case of these media going from reporting the news to making the news.”

The debate continued when word of dietary accommodations for Muslims at a rural maple-syrup lodge reached the ears of editorialists.

A *cabane à sucre*, a lodge serving rural cuisine alongside fresh maple syrup, is a staple of Quebec culture. The busiest time for *cabane à sucre* operators comes at the end of winter, when maple trees are harvested for sap. The pulling of

maple-syrup taffee cooled in fresh snow is a favorite treat of children and adults alike.

Traditional *cabane à sucre* cuisine is rich in ham, bacon, sausages and pork rinds. Still, many operators have begun altering their menus to satisfy niche markets such as vegetarians, Muslims and Jews. This dietary substitution seemed to offend a number of French Quebecers. Shock headlines in newspapers like the widely read tabloid *Le Journal de Montréal* only heightened the perception of an imminent societal breakdown caused by deep-fried halal potatoes.

In February, at the height of this string of controversies, Premier Jean Charest launched a commission to investigate public discontent around the issue of reasonable accommodation. The commission was to be co-chaired by sociologist Gérald Bouchard and reputed philosopher Charles Taylor.

The Bouchard-Taylor Commission published a consultation document, entitled *Seeking Common Ground: Quebecers Speak Out*, which serves as a jumping-off point for a series of public consultation hearings through 2007 and 2008. It was in reaction to this consultation document that the Muslim Council of Montreal organized the conference at McGill University.

At the conference, Marie McAndrew, an advisor on government bodies dealing with ethnicity, noted that the public debate over reasonable accommodation had focused specifically on the anxieties of people in the “regions”, the rural sectors outside of metropolitan areas, where people are not accustomed to living with diversity.

According to Ms. McAndrew, people who live in multicultural areas such as the city of Montreal are not likely to confuse racial stereotypes with the reality they encounter in their neighborhoods.

“The problem is when people who rely solely on the media for all their information begin to learn about minorities,” she told the conference attendees. “In a democracy, there is no requirement to abandon one’s religion. This isn’t supposed to be a debate about choosing between maintaining one’s religion and integrating.”

She later added, “People [in the regions] think that there is no integration going on, but we’re already integrated. That’s what people don’t realize.”

Pearl Eliadis, an international human-rights lawyer, echoed the sentiments of Marie McAndrew. She drew applause when she declared, “What people are just waking up to is that having immigration also means actually having immigrants.”

The strongest critic of the Commission’s consultation document was Fo Niemi, executive director of the Center for Research-Action on Race Relations (CRARR), a non-profit organization.

Finding problems in the Commission’s language and how that language framed the debate, CRARR set out to perform a critical analysis of the consultation document. Their hope is to correct this commission that will ultimately make policy recommendations to the government.

“The issues of race and racism have been completely erased from the document. But the issue of reasonable accommodation is about this,” he said, as

he pointed to the skin on his bare forearm. “The document even completely omits 9/11 and the rise in Islamophobia.”

Keynote speaker Jack Jedwab of the Association of Canadian Studies, “There is a big generational divide in views about Muslims. The younger generation is a lot more diverse. My kids read this in the papers, and they think it’s all intellectual nonsense.”

Numerous other commentators leveled further criticisms. Yet it was Navaid Aziz, an eloquent Montreal-born Muslim who studied Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, who summed up the concerns of critics and the disappointment of Muslims by quoting an old Urdu poem: “The desires of the heart have turned to tears and flowed away.”

Mr. Aziz called upon the community to rally together in the face of this public backlash, and to shed their self-righteousness. The weakness of the community, he said, is that “only a handful of Muslims want to participate, while the rest want to be passengers.”

He also praised Muslim women for their resilience.

“Sisters are prevented from participating in society because of their hijabs,” he said. “They are the true ambassadors of Islam, because 24 hours a day, they are out there, they’re wearing their hijabs, and they have to face this.”

Navaid Aziz’s calls for unity were followed by calls to action by Sameer Zuberi, communications coordinator for the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations.

According to Mr. Zuberi, the situation facing Muslims during the reasonable accommodation debate remains discouraging.

“We had the mayor of Quebec City come out and say that she wouldn’t allow a woman to work in the public sector even if that woman were wearing a ‘tissue’ on her head,” recounted Mr. Zuberi.

The only way to remedy the situation, he advised, is to forge broad-based coalitions and to be politically active. He encouraged attendees to file submissions to the government of Quebec.

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The day after the reasonable accommodation conference at McGill, I spoke to its organizer, Shaykh Salam Elmenyawawi, over the phone.

Shaykh Elmenyawawi is a familiar face and voice to Montreal-area Muslims. He currently serves as the chairman of the Muslim Council of Montreal, an umbrella group overseeing 35 mosques and community organizations. He is also a member of the chaplaincy at both McGill University and Concordia University, Montreal’s two large English universities. And yet he finds time to visit mosques, deliver *khutbas* about love, get feedback from Muslims around the city, and run a profitable electronics-automation company.

As if all that were not enough, he regularly appears on television and radio talk shows, and organizes conferences like the one at McGill.

This is all a far cry from the simpler goals of his younger days: to raise a family and be successful in business.

His life took a drastic turn in 1980, though. The sale of electronics equipment to companies in Pakistan aroused the attention of the Canadian government, who accused him of participating in creating what they called “the Islamic bomb.” He became a daily target in the media.

“It was very difficult. I had to face this all on my own,” Shaykh Elmenyawawi told me in his characteristic rapid-fire manner. “There were no community structures, other than simple grassroots support, to come to the defense of someone in the kind of situation I found myself in.”

Despite the unwelcome attention, Shaykh Elmenyawawi was exonerated in court. “In fact, I was even awarded a certificate of innocence. I can guarantee you that not many people have an actual certificate claiming their innocence.”

That ordeal helped focus Shaykh Elmenyawawi’s energies.

“As I faced this on my own, I had to think about why we, as a community, were not able to do this [process of advocacy and defense] properly,” he explained. “I wanted to help the community, then. I always felt that people should not be left to face things on their own, and that’s before any of this happened to me. But when it did happen, I wanted to make sure that it wouldn’t happen again to anyone else.”

So following his exoneration, Shaykh Elmenyawawi pursued studies at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt. On his return to Canada, he concentrated on defending civil liberties, organizing anti-war demonstrations, combating hate crimes, and many other activities through the Muslim Council of Montreal.

After the terror attacks of 2001, he visited churches and other community organizations to meet people outside the Muslim community and field questions. He pushed for an open-mosque policy that would allow curious non-Muslims to learn more about their Muslim neighbors.

When young Muslims came to him after September 11, many asked him the same question: “Shaykh, I have people coming to me telling me to go home, but what home?’ This is their home. They grew up here. And even the older generation, we left [our birth countries] specifically because within our own countries, we couldn’t call that a home. Those places didn’t cherish the values that I held to be so important. We have had to fight very hard to uphold these values [here]. *That* is Islamic.”

Those values seemed under attack during the reasonable accommodation debate. His frustration peaked during the niqab-voting controversy. He then set his efforts to organizing the conference at McGill.

“The thing we need above all else right now is activism,” he said. “Some extremists come out as being against religion, and we’re not against some of their criticisms. But right now the Muslim community is an easy scapegoat, perhaps in a vacuum of self-identity among French Quebecers. But the larger society did stand up with us, for example, in the demonstrations, the anti-war protests. *That’s* the majority.”

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I’m talking to Samaa Elibyari, host and producer of *Caravan*, a Muslim news show with an international focus, aired in Montreal on CKUT 90.3 FM and

through its website, ckut.ca. She's articulate, passionate, and a little bashful when I lift my camera to take her picture. For the moment, though, she is a little distracted. We're sitting in the common room of the community radio station. Just beside us are two loud young men, chatting and laughing as they demagnetize old reels of quarter-inch recording tape. The newsroom to my right is full of clacking and more chatter.

Samaa Elibyari, who describes herself through nervous laughter as "middle-aged", was vocal toward the end of the Muslim Council of Montreal's conference on reasonable accommodation.

"When you look at the names in the Commission," said Ms. Elibyari at the conference, "not one of them participates in any way in our community. And the document doesn't even treat on the subjects of 9/11, international politics, or the media."

It's an omission that Ms. Elibyari had little trouble recognizing. International politics is something she holds a keen interest in, through her weekly, one-hour radio program. Yet when she began producing her show ten years ago, she wasn't sure how to approach the subject matter or what to focus on.

"There was no sense of urgency to what I was doing," she told me frankly in the CKUT common room. "Of course, 9/11 was the wake-up call. There were a lot of stereotypes filling the reporting in the media, and a lot of repetition of clichés."

The larger media outlets were, in her estimation, doing everything wrong. So, inspired by American newscaster Charlie Rose's relaxed interviewing style, as well as the memory of radio broadcasts of *The Arabian Nights* during her

childhood in Egypt, Ms. Elibyari focused on raising public awareness of the issues facing Muslims.

“It’s a great tool for activism,” she explained of her yearly output of fifty shows. “But anyone who has done any radio production work knows how much work it takes to produce a solid weekly show.”

That hard work involves tracking down and interviewing guests speakers who are fluid, convincing, and eloquent. She regularly features international experts, scholars, activists, and many others, both Muslim and non-Muslim. On the day I dropped in to the studio, her show featured segments on human-rights abuses in Darfur, attacks on Lebanese intellectuals during the 2006 war in Lebanon, an anti-racism campaign taking place in campuses around Canada, and a Kashmir conference held in Uruguay.

Although tapped as the show’s guest host when it was launched ten years ago by the Muslim Community of Quebec, a Montreal community center active since 1979, Ms. Elibyari has become *Caravan’s* de facto host and producer over the years. She’s also seen a raft of younger co-hosts come and go. The halls of CKUT are full of student volunteers from nearby McGill University, for which CKUT also serves as a campus radio station.

“I would like to have younger people come to the show and take over. I would like to ‘retire’,” she says. “But I see young people—people in their 20s—as being very transitional. I would like our institutions to hire people to do this full-time, since community radio is volunteer-driven and not paid.”

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The need for interplay between the Muslim community and the media is of importance wherever Muslim minorities are present and growing. Certainly, non-Muslims remain curious about the subculture of Islam within the larger context of Western culture. I had encountered a TV crew busily filming during a Jumu'ah prayer at the large, newly built Al-Quba Mosque and Islamic Community Center in the Montreal suburb of Brossard. They were in the process of producing a documentary report for CBC, Canada's public broadcaster.

I spoke to Marie Belzil, one of the co-producers of the documentary. After wrapping up an afternoon's filming, she and her camera crew were idling on the sunny steps of the mosque's unfinished and currently unused front entrance. A grass field separated the mosque complex and the busy boulevard facing it. Across the street stands a large Coptic church.

"We're looking at the variety of the Muslim experience," she explained as the afternoon breeze tugged at the impromptu scarf wrapped over her head. "It's not just a religious thing but a cultural thing, like at this mosque where you have summer camps and sports, not just prayers."

The Al-Quba Mosque was the second mosque they had visited in their quest to better understand the life inside mosques around the city. There remained, however, skepticism over the CBC crew's stated goal.

Ali Chaouki, a cheerful, squat 42-year-old volunteer teacher at the Al-Quba Mosque, received me at his home. We sat in his backyard eating large cubes of freshly cut, deep-red watermelon while the late afternoon sun dipped lower and lower.

At Jumu'ah prayer, Mr. Chaouki is visible as the person always announcing upcoming barbecues and sports days. He is also being positioned as the mosque's media relations contact by the administrative council, and so had had contact with the crew.

"I asked them what their message was," he related to me. "They didn't really want to answer, but they mentioned that there was this concern with the British doctors," he said, referring to the failed terror attacks in London and Glasgow toward the end of June. "They said they weren't biased, but would they be here if they weren't biased, if they didn't already have this idea in the backs of their minds?"

According to Mr. Chaouki, the crew had also visited a "Salafi mosque," and "the guy there had said everything the reporter wanted to hear."

His frustration with the the media's implications was evident. He suggested that Muslims answer reporters' questions about violence and terrorism with a simple return question: "Are you a racist?"

He is also proud that the students he teaches during weekend Arabic classes are equally adept at undermining the hostility of the debate. He recounted to me how two of his teenage students, one male and one female, wrote essays in their high schools.

"They were able to argue their points logically," said Mr. Chaouki. "Quebecers complain about Muslims going to a *cabane à sucre*, but when people make an arrangement with a *cabane à sucre*, it's a business contract. That's it. You don't have to talk about 'reasonable accommodation.'"

Despite the frustrations of the current debate, and the feelings of unwelcome after 9/11, Mr. Chaouki says he eventually came to feel that “the world is my country.” He feels thoroughly Canadian. His children, too, are able to visit and enjoy Lebanon, but call themselves Canadian.

Originally from Lebanon, Mr. Chaouki arrived in Montreal in 1990. His days are occupied with the management of a medical-supplies firm he runs with his older brother. His passion, though, “is education.” On Saturdays, he teaches Arabic classes to youth from the ages of 13 to 23. He is also involved in administrative affairs at the mosque.

Still, his involvement in the community did not happen at the snap of a finger, he said. He recalled how, as a child, he used to watch his mother perform her prayers. As he settled down with his own family, he decided to provide a similar example to his children. This meant being more observant, and teaching his children the language of their ancestry. He also feared that his children might lose their connection to their faith if he didn’t present it to them in the right way.

During the earlier phases of operation of the new Al-Quba mosque and community center, he and others argued in favor of mixed classes for grade-school aged children. The “narrow-minded” opposed the plan, asking that children as young as “three years old” be separated.

“But look at where we are living,” Mr. Chaouki insisted to me. “Our children go to public schools where they can talk to Johnny or Suzie, but they come to the mosque and they can’t talk to their brothers or sisters in Islam?”

It is this inflexibility that Mr. Chaouki is deeply opposed to. “People are trying to make things harder for everyone. But the Prophet, *salallahu alayhi wasalaam*, said, ‘Make things easy for people, don’t make it difficult.’ If we make it too complicated or too hard, the children won’t want to learn it. They’ll choose to leave Islam behind. It’s not that we shouldn’t try to do what is best or try to teach something positive, but you can’t make it so difficult.”

His approach, then, is to present information openly. “I read a lot of different sources, and I take a comparative-religion approach. I say, ‘This is what’s on the market,’ and let the students decide. It’s all about choice. Of course, I do have my biases,” he said with laughter.

And though he finds his students struggling to learn a new language, they do have questions about Islam. Still, he insists they learn Arabic because “at some point, they will come across someone—a scholar, an expert—who has an interpretation. How are they going to know if that interpretation is true or not if they can’t read and understand the text themselves?”

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It had been nearly a month since I had first spoken to Mohamed Fadil, the Moroccan graduate student from the Université de Montreal. When I saw him again, he was having coffee downtown with Hafida Eddakya, a 42-year-old Moroccan single mother of two who had helped Mohamed adjust when he first arrived in Montreal nearly a year ago. She considers him as a kind of son.

I had first met Ms. Eddakya when I had signed up for a conversational Arabic class she was teaching at Concordia University. She had also taught Arabic

privately to diplomats, journalists, and businesspeople heading to the Middle East.

Like many other Moroccans, she settled in Montreal because it is a large French-speaking metropolis. Ms. Eddakya had studied in French throughout her life in Morocco, but left due to mounting frustration with “everything” there, including the politics, the economy, and even safety.

“People are accumulating diplomas there, to no effect,” she told me as we both sipped iced cappuccinos on a hot day. “Everything revolves around knowing someone.”

So with her French education, she decided to head to Montreal, the second-largest French-speaking metropolis in the world after Paris. Despite Morocco’s history as a French colony, and despite France’s proximity, France’s immigration policy proved more restrictive than Canada’s.

“It’s not easy to get permanent resident status there,” said Ms. Eddakya, “whereas here, it’s not difficult, and you get most of the social benefits—aside from voting rights, for example—that enable you to live and participate in society.”

This would certainly explain the huge growth of the French Muslim community in recent years. As Shaykh Elmenyawī had explained to me earlier, the number of Muslims from French-speaking countries, particularly North African ones, had overtaken the first generation of South Asian Muslims. For the Muslim Council of Montreal, this changing demographic has complicated the resolution of such issues as the moon-sighting method ahead of Ramadan.

Still, the pull of an open, French-speaking North American metropolis has brought many people from former French colonies. And, certainly, there are no shortage of cultural events in Montreal that allow the newly arrived and the long-settled to participate in the city's vibrant culture.

"Montreal *is* culture. You can find everything here." From Ms. Eddakya's purse, she pulled out a thick catalog of activities taking place at her local library, in the predominantly Italian suburb of St-Leonard. "Every neighborhood has something like this," she said. No surprise for a city named as UNESCO's World Book Capital City in 2005.

Despite the criss-crossing of cultures just outside her door, she still finds ignorance close at hand, even in the academic world.

"Sometimes, it's just a feeling you get, a look. 'Oh, you're an Arab? Oh, really...'"

Still, she does hear well-meaning questions from her many non-Muslim and non-Arab students.

"I try not to talk too much about religion, because I teach a language course, but I tell people to call me if they have questions, and people do. A lot of the time, they ask 'tourist' questions about things like clothing, dialects, and rituals like fasting."

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As the Bouchard-Taylor Commission travels across the province of Quebec to listen to people's concerns about reasonable accommodation, Muslims in Montreal may face further public backlash. Perhaps it's merely a side effect of

living in a city as diverse as Montreal, where each passing year brings an added richness and, for some, unfamiliarity.

But as Shaykh Elmenyawī told me, “We do read about a lot of negativity, but there are a lot of people doing a lot of good work. We have to be encouraged. We have to educate and be educated. And we have to be proud of our religion and our traditions. Be vocal, and don’t be afraid.”