



Freedom of religion or freedom from religion?

A Call to Action for an Inclusive Peel

THE EVENTS

News outlets across the GTA have been reporting on the heated debate over religious accommodations for Muslim students within Peel District School Board (PDSB) schools, specifically around Salat al-Jumma (Friday prayers)¹. Granting access to space to Muslim students to conduct their Friday prayers has been a long standing Board practice and policy. Recently, a highly divisive local debate around this issue erupted. To some, the ongoing debate is seen as a simple unveiling of racism that has always covertly existed, but particularly now threatens to undermine the social fabric of a region that is celebrated as the most diverse and accepting across Canada. Others feel that the Board policy violates the foundations of secularism, which is built on the elimination of religion from public institutions, including schools. The 8 month long debate, resulting from a revised operating procedure, has tested the school board's commitment to inclusive practices, sparked protest among those opposed to the accommodations, and unfairly targeted Islam and Muslims.

As an organization that builds diversity, equity, and inclusion capacity amongst community members and within organizations in Peel, The Regional Diversity Roundtable is alarmed by the emerging and increasing islamophobic rhetoric, hate speech and culture of fear surrounding religious accommodations. We do not condone Islamophobia, hate speech, and discrimination based on religion. It not only goes against our mandate and principles, it also is antithetical to inclusive community building.

To create greater understanding and to present a call to action around the issue at hand, we pose the following questions to our Peel community:

How have local and global socio-political contexts informed this debate?

How are we defining freedom of religion, freedom from religion and secularism?

How can residents and organizations engage in this discussion to sustain and further our collective community beliefs of equity and inclusion?

How can we separate religious accommodation from religious practice?

THE VIEWPOINTS

The Ontario Human Rights Code clearly outlines that discrimination based on religion is against the law. That is, **freedom of religion** includes the right for individuals to observe their religion to the point of undue hardship to others because of cost and/or health and safety reasons². The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms further supports this requirement³. PDSB has affirmed that providing accommodation for Friday prayers is aligned with their safe and inclusive schools mandate and complies with exiting legislations⁴.

On the other hand, opponents argue that as secular public institutions, schools must not allow any religious practices or activities to take place. That is, providing religious accommodations is in contradiction with secularism, traditionally conceptualized as a strict separation between church and state. In other words, **freedom from religion** is equated with secularism where religion is seen as a private and personal part of an individual that does not belong in the public eye. Other arguments that community members have expressed in support of this view include: that preference is given to one faith over another, religious accommodations cause distractions in learning for other students and unwarranted

¹ Communal worship in which devout Muslims participate every Friday

<http://www.citynews.ca/2017/01/10/debate-muslim-prayer-heats-pdsb-meeting/>

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/03/22/peel-school-board-issues-fact-sheet-to-quell-misinformation-on-religious-accommodation.html>

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/04/03/schools-must-accommodate-religious-needs-ontario-human-rights-commission-says.html?platform=hootsuite>

² <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/religious-rights-fact-sheet>

³ http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/About/Parliament/Education/ourcountryourparliament/html_booklet/canadian-charter-rights-and-freedoms-e.html

<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>

⁴ <http://www.peelschools.org/staff/equity/Pages/default.aspx>



exposure to religion, and that it is a slippery slope for other 'dangerous' religious accommodations. This perspective has been expressed and endorsed by diverse communities in Peel.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Why now and why the Muslim community?

This debate is not happening within a vacuum nor is it a coincidence that one particular faith community is at the centre of it. Rather, current local and global socio-political contexts have heightened and further shaped the reactions to religious accommodation in Peel schools, particularly for the Muslim community. We live in a post 9/11 era. An era where powerful politicians and public figures – on both sides of the border – are giving rise to, creating space for and validating the targeting of marginalized communities under the veil of patriotism and protection of the 'common man' (re: M-103 debate, anti-immigration sentiments, Canadian values). Islamophobia is as real as the increasing diversity we like to flaunt within our Peel community. For this reason, we, the Peel community, must ask ourselves: How much of this debate stems from real and prevalent issues and how much of it is shaped by our socio-political climate, fear mongering of the "other" and our personal attitudes and biases? Is the idea of freedom from religion being used to target the Muslim community? Do we believe that Muslims students are the only ones being accommodated in our public schools? And, perhaps more importantly, would this ever happen with another faith community in Peel and Canada?

How is secularism being defined and understood?

The term secular(ism) has been brought up a number of times throughout the past 8 months as a way to defend freedom from religion in schools. However, we need to clearly define and understand what is meant by secularism within public institutions, specifically the school system. Secularism is intended to ensure that no one religion prevails in shaping organizing principles of a democratic and multicultural society, such as laws and legislations, systems and institutions, and policies, structures and norms; if guided by one religion, the organizing principles will inevitably favour one group over all others. The rise of secularism in Canada and Ontario was primarily fuelled by the notion that no one religion should be imposed on others – whether in the school system or city council meetings⁵. In this way, secularism speaks to inclusive practices and creates the foundation for supporting religious accommodation not vice versa. Secularism combats the institutionalization of one religion over another while religious accommodations are provided to anyone so long as the practicing of one's faith does not infringe on the rights of others or the organizing principles of an institution. In the case of PDSB, it is about providing space and excusing students from class if necessary to pray; all other students carry on with their regular activities and classes. This practice and policy is an apt example of PDSB's secular structure as it is allowing students to bring to their schools their own conceptualization of faith and practice it without barriers. RDR would be remiss in implementing its principles if however, we did not pose some questions that all of us should reflect on:

How even is the notion of secularism defined through a Judaeo-Christian and/or western cultural lens?

Who is Ontario and Canada secular for? And are our constitutional laws and practices bias free and inclusive?

Why is there a need for religious accommodations in our institutions?

What kind of community are we creating?

Secularism is propelled by the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. When we say no religion in schools we are telling our children they cannot bring their whole selves to school. We are telling our Muslim neighbours that their religion is 'less than'. We are telling marginalized communities that there are limits to inclusion and diversity, that the public space will only tolerate them if it fits a pre-existing Judaeo-Christian and/or Western cultural mould. Is this the type of community we want to create? Can this type of community thrive? Research shows that individuals and community members do better when they are able to express all aspects of their identities, are not excluded for any of their differences, are provided opportunities to contribute, see themselves reflected and valued in the social fabric of a community. For this reason, an inclusive community cannot simply be about complying with legislation; it must embody the values and principles espoused by these legislations.

⁵ <http://centreforinquiry.ca/a-brief-history-of-secularism-in-canada/>



How can we further social justice values in Peel?

Multiple past, current, and projected population demographics will highlight how organically diverse Peel is. However, that does not mean that equity and inclusion for this diversity will organically prevail as well. Equity and inclusion work is intentional and conscious; it requires commitment, dedication, as well as proactive and respectful dialogue over differences. Moving from equality to equity and from integration to inclusion requires cross-cultural and cross-sectoral collaboration where mutual respect and the prioritization of the collective good are key.

For this reason, we urge Peel community members and organizations to stand in support of marginalized communities, address and dispel misinformation circulating in the community around Islam, the Muslim community as well as religious freedom and accommodations and create safe spaces for productive dialogues on issues of equity and inclusion.

As always, we hope to work through this issue to create a region where everyone can work, live, play, and thrive.

Best,
The Regional Diversity Roundtable
Board and staff