

# The Non-Muslim Work Environment

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### Introduction

According to the 2001 census of Canada, the number of Muslims has increased considerably, especially in cosmopolitan cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa. The census shows that Muslims are the fourth largest religious group in the country, after Catholics, Protestants and those who have just identified themselves as 'Christians'.

An important factor in this immigration trend is Canada's fame as a just society when it comes to dealing with the minorities. How should the Muslims live as a minority in the West in general and in Canada in particular? There are two important principles that should guide the conduct of Muslims as a minority.

### First Principle of Conduct as a Minority

It is the duty of the minority to respect the host society and to treat it with justice and fairness just as we would expect the host society to be just and fair to the minorities.

The first migration in the history of Islam took place when Muslims found themselves being persecuted by the Meccan majority. The Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) advised the Muslims to migrate to Abyssinia and the reason why he chose that country was, in his own words, because "it is ruled by a king under whom no one is dealt with unjustly."

Therefore, justice should be the criterion for migrating to a country. In addition, it is the duty of the Muslim minority to reciprocate by dealing with the host society on the basis of justice and fairness, rather to go even further, and imbibe the sense of concern and well-being for the good of the society and the country.

### Second Principle of Conduct as a Minority

As a minority, it is very easy for the next and then the third generation's to quickly melt into the host

society and lose the essential values of Islam and their Muslim heritage.

Therefore, it is important to inculcate within ourselves and in our next generation the importance of maintaining the essential values of the Islamic faith and even the wise traditions of our cultures. After all, Canadian society is a mosaic of multi-culturalism.

There are two aspects of preserving Islamic values and traditions: on the personal level and on the social level.

(a) In personal and private matters, it is very easy to maintain and preserve our values: Muslims can abide by their Islamic dress code, their dietary rules, and their religious way of praying, etc. Nobody is affected by that at all.

In a multi-cultural society like Canada where everyone is allowed to dress according to his or her taste and choice, no one can object to Muslims if they choose to dress in a way they like. Nor can a Muslim be prevented from adhering to the Islamic dietary rules.

(b) However, it becomes more challenging to maintain and preserve the Islamic values in the public arena where a Muslim has to interact with non-Muslims at a formal or business level. Peer pressure has its own impact and pulls one towards total assimilation. What a Muslim has to aim for is not total assimilation but smart assimilation and that is in essence the spirit of multi-culturalism.

In order to pave the way for the next generation so that they face less of a challenge in living up to Islamic values, it is imperative for the present Muslims to familiarize the host society –Canadian of other faiths– with the essential values of Islam.

The legal system of Canada has the suitable environment to recognize and accept the Muslim ways of doing things. It is not the duty of the host society to go and find out what are the requirements or, the 'special needs,' of the Muslims when they interact with non-Muslims at a formal or business level. It is the duty of the Muslims themselves to let the host society know about their special requirements.

## **Problems Faced by Muslim Minorities**

Here, I would like to mention some of the difficulties that Muslims generally face when they interact at the formal, business level with their non-Muslim colleagues. Some Muslims are courageous enough to explain their values to their co-workers and employers, but many are not that courageous and end up violating their own religious laws.

### **1. Beards for Men**

According to the majority of Muslims –and I am referring here to the schools of Shi'as, Hanafis, Malikis, and Hanbalis– it is forbidden for men to shave their beards. (According to the Shafi'is, it is disliked, but not forbidden, to shave the beard.) <sup>2</sup> Of course, they are allowed, rather, strongly advised, to trim the

beard and keep it clean.

Therefore, when you see that a Muslim employee does not shave his beard, this should not be taken as a sign of an unhygienic attitude; rather it is part of his religious requirement.

Of course, if the nature of the work is such that having the beard is going to endanger the life of that worker or others around him (e.g., if that Muslim worker is required to wear a protective mask to prevent him from inhaling dangerous gases, then the presence of facial hair will make the mask useless), then there is room to reconsider that prohibition. However, this is just an exception to the rule.

Many times, I have been asked: "Why do Muslim men keep beards?" My response is that: this question is not valid. Growing a beard is very natural and you do not need justification for doing natural things. The question "why" is more appropriate and logical for things which are against nature. Therefore, my response is one that rephrases the question: "Why do you shave your beard?" and not "Why do you keep a beard?"

## **2. Hijab or Dress Code for Women**

One of the challenges for a practicing Muslim woman who joins the Canadian work force is abiding by her Islamic dress code. She is required according to Islamic laws to dress modestly in such a way that she covers her whole body except her face and hands. This also means that she has to put on a scarf over her head.<sup>3</sup>

It is encouraging to see that major corporations are accommodating this requirement. I have seen Muslim bank tellers working with their scarves as well as a crewmember of Air Canada with a green scarf (matching with the airline's uniform) checking the boarding passes at the Pearson International Airport of Toronto.

No employer has a right to reject the job application of a Muslim woman or dismiss her from her work just because of her hijab or Islamic dress. Based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Federal Court of Appeal in Calgary ruled in 1995 that a Sikh RCMP officer be allowed to wear his turban on the job. Therefore, it is evident that the law is in favor of those Muslims who would like to abide by their religious requirements in the workplace.

## **3. Shaking Hands**

A practicing Muslim man or woman would avoid or refuse to shake hands with a person of the opposite sex who is not related to him or her by blood or marriage.<sup>4</sup> Instead of shaking hands, a practicing Muslim will politely bow the head as a sign of respect while greeting others.

This is a long-standing Islamic tradition and is based on the rules of decent interaction between the genders. For example, whenever the Prophet asked the Muslims to pledge allegiance to him, the men

would shake his hand but the women were asked to pledge allegiance in a different way: a bucket full of water would be brought, the Prophet Muhammad would then dip his hand in, and then the women would dip their hands in that bucket—and that would be considered their allegiance to the Prophet.

Therefore, if you see a Muslim man or woman avoiding shaking your hand or refusing to do so, please do not take that as a sign of disrespect or insult; he or she is only following the Islamic law of not touching anyone of the opposite sex except those who are related by blood or marriage. This has nothing to do with the intention of anyone. No one would question the intention of the Prophet or the women when he asked them to pledge allegiance to him through the water bucket instead of touching his hand directly.

This is probably the most difficult challenge that practicing Muslims face in their interaction with non-Muslims. Once the non-Muslim colleagues are told about it, they do not feel offended. I know of young Muslims who were born or raised in Canada and who do not shy away from following this religious requirement and can easily communicate the same to their non-Muslim colleagues. Many times the problem is not with the non-Muslims, it is with the non-practicing Muslims who, by their behavior, give a very conflicting message to the non-Muslims. [5](#)

#### **4. Religious Holidays**

As a multi-cultural society, Canada has been gradually accommodating the minorities even in matters of their religious holidays. Most school boards in the Greater Toronto Area have a policy of not scheduling exams during the holidays of a variety of religions, including Islam. Some universities now allow students who must miss a test for religious holidays to make it up at another date.

The work force in Canada has been somewhat slower in following the educational institutions. There is recognition for the holidays of Judeo-Christian faiths, but not for the ones of the Muslim faith. At the least, Muslim employees should be given vacation with pay for the two major *'idds* in the Islamic calendar. For other religious events of importance, they may negotiate with their employer(s) to work on the days when their co-workers are absent for their religious holidays.

#### **5. Daily and Friday Prayers**

As far as the daily prayers are concerned, Muslim workers should be able to find time to say their noon and after-noon prayers during lunch or coffee breaks. If the lunch and coffee breaks are very short, then they should approach the employer(s) to get a longer break—time and commit to make up the lost time by working a little longer at the end of the day or at the end of the week.

Friday Prayer is also an issue for Muslim workers.

As part of their religious requirement, Muslims have to go to the closest mosque or Islamic center for the special weekly prayer at mid-day time on Fridays. I have been asked many times to write letters to employers to certify that their employee's request for time off to go for Friday prayer is a bona fide

religious request. On this issue also, I would advise the Muslims to negotiate with the employers and offer to make up the lost time by working overtime on other days.

## 6. Participation in the Christmas Party

Giving best wishes for Christmas to Christians or giving cards and gifts to them is not against our teachings even though we do not believe that Jesus was born on the 25th of December. However, no employee can be forced to participate in or even decorate for the Christmas party, especially if it involves drinking and dancing.

In year 2001, a Jehovah's Witness who worked at a pharmacy in B.C. was asked to decorate the store for the Christmas selling season. He refused. He was given an ultimatum: decorate or be fired. The B.C. Human Rights Tribunal found that the employer knew that the employee's religious beliefs prevented him from participating in any celebration of Christmas, including decorating the store, and the store did not attempt to accommodate those beliefs. The Tribunal ruled in the employee's favor and awarded damages to him.

## Conclusion

The above are some of the challenges that Muslims face while interacting with the non-Muslims at the work place, and how they deal with these challenges depends on the Muslims themselves.

They have to educate the non-Muslim colleagues about their values and their traditions, and, trusting on the accommodating nature of the Canadian people and the legal safeguards to protect the rights of the individuals and minorities, Muslims cannot complain that Canada does not allow them to abide by their religious requirements.

May Almighty Allah give courage to the Muslim men and women who strive to practice Islam in Canada, and grant wisdom to those who are not practicing, and may He bless the Canadian people for their tolerance and accommodating nature.

[1.](#) This section is an extended version of a talk that I gave on 'Islam On Focus' TV program on 5th July 2003.

[2.](#) Abdu'r-Rahman al-Jazari, al-Fiqh 'ala 'l-Madhahibi 'l-Arba 'ah, vol.2 (Beirut: Dar ath-Thaqalayn, 1998) p.78-90.

Among the Shi'a jurists there are differences in defining the beard; for some, like the late Sayyid al-Khu'i, the "French cut" (goatee) was sufficient but for the majority, there has to be at least a continuous line going from side to side.

[3.](#) For more details on this subject, you may refer to my Hijab: a Muslim woman's dress (2005) published by ISIJ of Toronto

[4.](#) This is not only unique to Muslims. Even the Orthodox Jewish communities avoid shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex and this prohibition is known as *shmirath negiah* or *shomer negiah*.

[5.](#) An interesting report from the U.S is worth narrating here: On April 24, 2003, President Bush declared military victory in Iraq to a large Iraqi audience in Dearborn (the famous 'Arab town' in the USA). He finished his speech and turned around to shake the hands of the people. He stuck his hand out to a woman with hijab but she did not shake it. He tried the next head-covered woman and she reacted the same way as the first one. Bush turned to the mayor and asked: "What's wrong, why won't these women shake my hand?" The mayor answered, "They are believers." The President said, "I believe in God but I still shake people's hands." Somebody should have explained to Bush that some Muslim women consider it

haram to shake a strange man's hand, even if it were the hand of Ceaser. ( Neal AbuNab, "Halal vs. Haram: Blessed vs. Sinful," The Arab American News (December 3-9, 2005) p. 17

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