

RADIX

McGill's Spirituality Magazine

Summer/Fall 2010 Issue



Accommodating Religion

EVERY TWO MONTHS OR SO, RADIX PUBLISHES STUDENT-WRITTEN ARTICLES ON RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL MATTERS. REGARDLESS OF YOUR RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OR SPIRITUAL INCLINATIONS, RADIX IS MADE FOR YOU, BY YOU. HERE, YOU CAN DISCUSS ANYTHING FROM GOD TO NIETZCHE TO THE SPIRITUALLY ELEVATING PROPERTIES OF PEANUTS. SO TAKE A DEEP BREATH, AND LET PEN AND PAPER MEET.

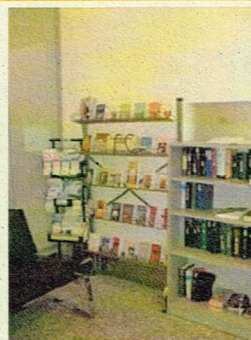
editor's MeSSage

This issue tackles the current debate over Reasonable Accommodation. Even in a country where some would say that the value of multiculturalism is more ingrained in the national psyche than patriotism; there continues to be contention over cultural and religious diversity. In this context, we asked students what the rhetoric of "respect", "tolerance" and "accommodation" really means to them. Where are the limits to "accommodation"? Or should they exist at all?

The submissions received reflect many of the issues up for debate at both a social and political level in Quebecois society, and throughout the majority of the Western world. Just as on societal level there is major contention surrounding issues ranging from pluralistic religious education in public schools, to the application of Sharia Law; on campus, debate continues to spark over the exclusion of prayer from convocation ceremonies, the lack of university-provided prayer space for Muslim students and the right of members of pro-life groups to publically manifest their convictions.

The following tackles issues at both levels from a unique student perspective. In "A Space to Pray", Salman Hafeez speaks of his struggles as a Muslim student to find an appropriate environment for prayer on campus. Whereas Murtaza Shambhoora shares his views on the current debate over the Niqab from a Saudi Arabian perspective. In my article "Terminal One" I bring up the great encounter of people of faith that occurs day after day in Toronto Pearson Airport's Multi-faith Chapel. This example of a coming-together and the legitimate challenges that these attempts spur, begs questions about how these issues will continue to play out at McGill.

Eric Bolo and Simca Simpson
Co-Editors



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Simca Simpson and Eric Bolo

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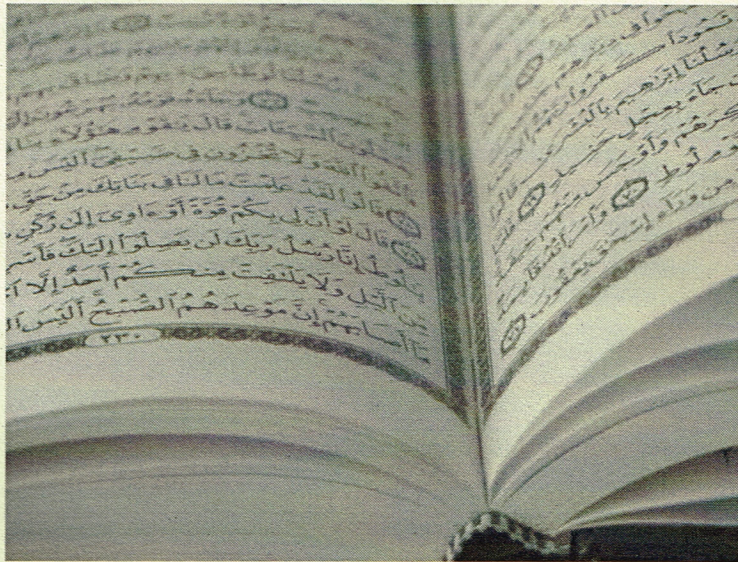
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a Space to pray

By: Salman Hafeez

As an international Muslim student, I have always longed for proper prayer space on campus. When I arrived in Canada three years ago, from ten time zones away, I was shocked and disappointed to learn that the Muslim Students Association (MSA) had just recently been evicted from its former space. The university administration's claims for eviction were (among other) that of McGill being a secular institution that did not want to give any special privileges (in form of space) to a specific student group's.

After various negotiations with the administration broke down, MSA lodged a formal complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission. Presently, a huge portion of the MSA office within the William Shatner building serves as a 'temporary prayer space.' However, the maximum capacity of the room is 25 and I often had to wait outside as long as 15 minutes to be able to find a spot.



Moreover, the present prayer space within the Shatner building is not accessible for prayers falling outside the normal hours of operations. In such circumstances, I anxiously search for a 'spot' around campus, where I could offer my prayers and connect with my Creator. These spots include places underneath stairways, areas between secluded library bookshelves and in desolate library corners,

praying in the lower field grounds (weather permitting) and basements of different buildings.

Not having a proper space adversely affects my university experience in the longer run. Within these various 'make-shifts' prayer areas, I am unable to offer the prayers with the level of passion and devotion that Islam requires of me. It's really hard to concentrate, when there is loud music blaring from Gert's, or someone wants to get a book off the shelf that you happen to be praying next to. Many times, these places are not clean, whereas 'cleanliness of the place' is one of the prerequisite for prayer. For me, praying in such unsuitable conditions and inappropriate environments transforms the act of prayer into a mere series of mechanical operations, devoid of any real connection with Allah. Consequently, it is no surprise that other aspects of my life (studies) are affected negatively as well. At times, I have contemplated not offering a specific prayer as I happened to be far away from Shatner building or was unable to find a suitable 'spot' for myself.

In the end, I can just hope that the university administration does wake up to realize the need of the Muslim students. Campuses across north America have provided accommodation for Muslim students so I really do not see why McGill has to be the exception.

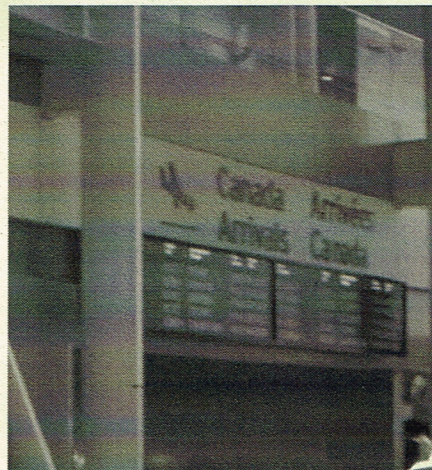
"Radix" is Latin for "root." It is the aim of this student-run interfaith publication to provide a voice from as many of McGill's religious and cultural "roots" as possible. In a world marked by division, the Radix seeks to show that we humans can co-exist in peace. Radix seeks original student photographs, cartoons, and drawings. Our goal is to promote unity, but not uniformity, so whatever your perspective – from A(theism) to Z(oroastrianism) – consider submitting your work to radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca.



McGill

Chaplaincy Service

Please note that the articles featured in this and all issues of the Radix do not necessarily represent the views of the editors and/or McGill's Chaplaincy Service.



terminal one

By Simca Simpson

The Multi-faith Centre at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, operating since 1979 under the Aviation Interfaith Ministry, has hosted religious services, weddings, baptisms and funeral services for various faith groups. It serves airport staff, who find their spiritual home within its walls, as well as thousands of passengers who seek out its services during travels that often involve family emergencies.

While waiting for a lift from Toronto's Pearson International Airport this weekend I came face to face with the reality of interreligious accommodation. Over the sound of Nacho Libre, which I was watching on my laptop in the arrivals area of Terminal 1, I managed to decipher a loudspeaker message from afar: "Catholic Mass will be held at the Interfaith Chapel at 1pm. All are welcome". This simple announcement got the wheels turning in my mind. First of all, I was somehow surprised that such a chapel was operating in an area that I had passed through on so many occasions, and I was unaware of it. Secondly, I was excited at the possibility of experiencing the Mass in such a unique setting and getting a feel for the demographic that would make up Airport Chapel-goers.

Scurrying in heels past dozens of exhausted passengers with a large suitcase in tow, I managed to enter the chapel just in time to hear the Fr. Terrence McKenna begin the greeting "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". We prayed for those who were travelling, for those who were sick and for the Mother Church in Her time of Easter jubilation, all while dozens of planes took off from the nation's hub of international travel.

Mass was almost over when the priest said "Let us pray" and instead of hearing a prayer read out of the Missal, I heard the voices of numerous men chanting "Allāhu Akbar". I realized that in the midst of my contemplation of the Eucharist I had neglected to notice that dozens of Muslim airport employees had filed into the back room of the Prayer Centre to "hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off busi-

ness" through Friday Prayer.

Though we continued our prayer and finally gave thanks to God because we were free to "go in peace to love and to serve the Lord", I couldn't help but be struck by the uniquely Canadian situation of inter-religious accommodation in which I was placed. This is the reality of the Multi-faith Chapel at Pearson, and of Canadian society at large. We come together day after day to work, study and enjoy the company of our brothers and sisters of all belief systems and religious convictions, learning from each other and finding unity in common values. But, as in the Multi-faith centre, there are limits to accommodating the other. For me, admittedly, there are limits in how much I will bend my practices out of respect, without compromising the undeniable eschatological and transcendental reality of my Christian faith. In my experience, I am not alone in this respect.

A stimulating conversation with Rev. Peter King, Evangelical Christian Chaplain at Pearson Terminal One gave me a feel for how the limits of accommodation play out in the Multi-faith Centre setting. As I suspected, he reported that occasionally, Catholic mass-goers had complained about hearing Muslim prayer while the Mass was still being celebrated. Many have asked, for example, why Muslims could not wait until Mass had ended to begin their prayers. While he also claims to have run into Muslims who found the Multi-faith Prayer Centre an inappropriate location to fulfill their religious obligations because of its makeshift inter-faith nature.

Rev. King, spoke with me about everything from Jewish-Christian relations to the Christian biblical apocrypha to interfaith marriage, all while shaking the hands of Muslims who filed out through the lobby for prayer. In the end, he said, we respect individuals with different beliefs and the daily practice that their faith entails because "we can't afford any fights". Recalling a case in November, where a three year old child fell to their death from the third floor of the airport complex, the pastor implied that he would not be able to preach his message at Pearson or tend to this airport community flock, if he could work peacefully not only with his Catholic brothers and sisters, but also those of other faiths. The message rang true to me, and left me reflecting on profound experience of humanity that I had just experienced.



Photo Credit: Simca Simpson

Visit to the Al-Omah Al-Islamiah Mosque

As one of our last My Neighbour's Faith Events of the academic year, a group of McGill students had the unique experience of visiting the Al-Omah Al-Islamiah Mosque on rue St. Dominique in Downtown Montreal. This event series is a joint initiative of McGill's Chaplaincy Service and the Social Equity and Diversity Education Office.

Despite a relatively small turnout, students came from various religious and non-religious backgrounds to learn about Islam from the perspective of those who practice it. McGill's Muslim Chaplain, Imam Salam Elmenyawi used the event to address the topic of "submitting oneself before God" which is what the term Islam means to convey.



I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mosquée Al-Omah Al-Islamiah for their welcome and hospitality, Imam Salam Elmenyawi for his generosity with his time, and all the volunteers and people involved with the McGill Chaplaincy's "My Neighbour's Faith" program. In welcoming people of all backgrounds and faiths to the mosque, the Muslims at Mosquée Al-Omah Al-Islamiah are exhibiting the values behind the principle of accommodation that we all hope to see more of in Canada: tolerance, respect and a welcoming spirit. As many Muslim Canadians continue to show hospitality and goodwill towards Canadians of all backgrounds and faiths, it is my hope and prayer that more and more Canadians will be inspired by their example and respond in kind.

Josiah Klassen is a U1 student in Linguistics and Political Science. His hope is to follow the teachings of Jesus, and he loves talking with and learning from people of all backgrounds and faiths. You are most welcome to contact him at josiah.klassen@gmail.com.

MCGILL STUDENTS unite *AGAINST* the bite

By: Simca Simpson

On April 15th, students from McGill and Concordia motivated by the Faiths Act Campaign, joined at The Yellow Door in support of eradication of malaria through the Spread the Net Campaign. This initiative was unique not only because of the diverse vocal, instrumental and dance performances that were enjoyed: from Klezmer music to celtic fiddle to hoop dancing. But rather, because it expressly brought together young people of diverse faith traditions, united by common values to work for a better future.

The night was not only a time to enjoy performances, including that of Chaplaincy's own New Earth Voices Choir; but also to have vital discussions with people of diverse perspectives about such issues as the role of religious faith in "development" work, and the factors that motivate individuals on campus to get involved in this kind of action. Many participating in the interfaith dialogue aspect of the event expressed what Faiths Act Fellow Nicholas Pang has described as "faith-based calls to action". The night was a success on a number of levels. First, it raised over \$500 for the Spread the Net Campaign, which Tony Blair, patron of the Faiths Act Campaign through his Faith Foundation, has promised to match through personal contributions. Secondly, canned good items were collected *en masse* to deliver to Montreal's Benedict Labre House.

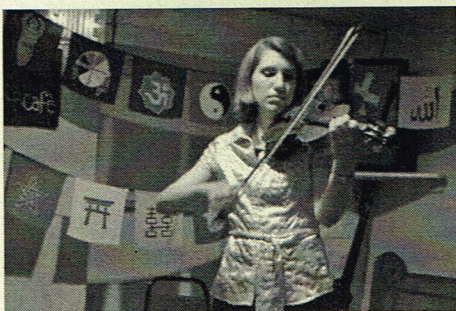


Photo Credit: Sara Eftekhari

the niqab controversy

By: Murtaza Shambhoora

I have spent sixteen years of my life growing up in Saudi Arabia, a country where Islam monopolizes the workings of government, culture, and society. In a country that is known to be the bastion of Islam around the world, women are required to wear a 'Niqab' or 'hijab' to cover their heads out of respect to the national religion. Thus, the concept of the 'Niqab' is something I have grown up with all my life, and it is shameful to see that the controversy surrounding it in the Western world often seems to be characterized by ignorance and a lack of knowledge.

This article is not meant to recount the timeline of the current Niqab controversy stirring in Canada. Instead, it is meant to offer a clear understanding of why women in Islamic countries choose to wear the controversial piece of clothing, and to offer a clear argument about whether or not it should be acceptable in western societies that preach the values of equality and democracy.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France is a staunch supporter of the Niqab ban, stating that it is a 'sign of [women] debasement' that goes against western morals. In an increasingly liberal world where equity of both race and gender are preached as being cornerstones of the modern way of life, many view the Islamic tradition of wearing Niqabs as being both backwards and oppressive. This philosophy has affected the politics of many European countries, and more recently, Quebec. Is it then justifiable to impose such laws on immigrants who wish to express their religious preferences in public?

As immigrants, it is important for individuals to follow the laws and norms in the society they choose to live in.

Take the case of a Muslim woman who chooses to better her life by moving to France and utilizing the resources the country has to offer. By making this conscious decision, she must respect the laws, and most importantly, the philosophy of the society she is entering, whether or not they coincide with her religious views. Take Saudi Arabia as an example, despite a diverse foreign population that believes in numerous religions and philosophies, immigrants obey the rule of law (which forces them to wear a hijab in public) simply because that is the overriding philosophy in the country. As foreigners, they reap the economic benefits of holding a stable job in an oil rich country, but are forced to act in ways that violate their philosophies and religious beliefs.

The question we must then ask ourselves is whether or not Western democracies would like to emulate such totalitarian regimes in the Middle East by taking away the right for immigrants to express their religious preferences. While Western society may be trying to eliminate the oppression of women, in doing so it is violating the right to express one's religion. A ban on the Niqab is the wrong approach to take on this issue if Western scholars and politicians are trying to preach the equality of genders. It will only result in increasing frustration by Muslims around the world, further ruining the delicate balance that has been achieved between the West and the more Islamist regimes in the post 9/11 era. If the Western governments really do want to integrate women who wear Niqabs into their societies, they must take a more gradual approach, explaining to them the Western values of liberalism. A ban will only alienate these women from society, discouraging them from living in a country that no longer accepts their culture.

The ultimate aim of all religions is for everyone to be friends. I found this particularly inspiring as I mused about how true this is. Despite all the variations, with different god(s), rules, rituals, theories, etc, it seems all religions really are stemming from the same motivation. To promote harmony and genuine goodwill between people, so that everyone can treat each other as equals and friends. In fact, I'm especially attracted to this idea because I'm very into friendship. I muse, theorize, and philosophize about friendship all the time, as it's such a fascinating theme of life!

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Finally, we must also eliminate the impression that many Westerners have of the Niqab being a piece of clothing that glorifies a misogynistic way of life. We forget the fact that many women choose to wear the Niqab regardless of societal or familial pressures. Islamic scholars are divided upon their opinions of whether or not the Niqab is obligatory (varying upon their interpretation of The Qu'uran). Historically, it is said that the Prophet Muhammad's wives were required to wear the Niqab; women today choose to wear the piece of clothing in order to 'bring themselves closer to God' and 'emulate' the great wives of The Prophet.

My recent experiences in Saudi Arabia have led me to believe that despite the presence of a large population of women who still choose to wear the Niqab, the infiltration of Western ideas in the Middle East have led to increasing liberalization within the Islamic philosophy. Many women who have stopped wearing a Niqab choose not to not because there is a law preventing them from doing so, but because they have learned the Western concepts of equity and themselves view the Niqab as being a form of oppression and sexism. This is a clear example of how the rational preaching of Western morals is a more viable alternative to slapping a ban on religious clothing.



Image by: Tegan Mackay

IT PERSPECTIVES ON MODATING RELIGION

Be **mature**. Be able to accept different religions and cultures in our society with an open mind, without trying to dominate with your own religion and denounce all others. Learn to see the good sides and 'kernels of truth' from each religion as well.

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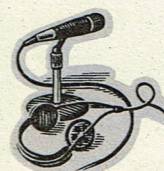
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