

2010.06.10

The Secretary
Toronto Public Library Board
789 Yonge St.
Toronto M4W 2G8

Re: Islamization of public space

To the Secretary and Board:

I write to object to the presence of permanent Islamic symbols in the public library, namely Muslim-themed carpets in Thorncliffe branch. The presence of this permanent architectural feature, unlike collections of books and other materials or displays and exhibits, violates the separation of church and state that a public library must uphold. It is, moreover, actively alarming to minorities and others who are under threat by radical Islam, with which the Library is now implicated.

Facts learned at reopening

I attended the reopening of Thorncliffe branch on 2010.04.13. I talked to the architect, Phil Carter, about the renovation. I mentioned the floral carpets installed at Beaches branch, a favourite architectural feature of mine, which prompted Mr. Carter to introduce me to interior designer Sheilagh Fletcher. I asked her about Thorncliffe's carpets. They're in more of an Islamic motif, she told me, because of the makeup of the community. Like damask, she said.

I asked Ms Fletcher if she really didn't understand why it was a bad idea for a public space, the public library, to use religious symbols in its carpeting. She said nothing. It *is* a bad idea.

Public space has to be free of permanent references to religion

Public libraries are, by definition, public space. Libraries have an active obligation to uphold a separation of church and state. Libraries may not show favouritism to any group, let alone religious groups.

Obviously the special nature of libraries comes into play. Libraries are repositories of knowledge as expressed in literature, cinema, and other forms. Libraries have a centuries-long history of upholding freedom of speech and conscience. I unreservedly support the right of any library, including TPL, to select whatever legally available materials it chooses for display, reference, and/or circulation. Special collections themed for a specific group are not really special under this philosophy. Besides, materials come and go, and even special collections can be and are moved from branch to branch.

Displays and exhibits are another case where freedom of expression remains paramount. Displays and exhibits on any subject whatsoever are welcome in a public library – in fact,

libraries are the obvious place for them. Displays can include religious festivals, including Christmas, which is debatably religious at this point. (Hence Christmas trees are not part of this discussion.) Displays and exhibits are not permanent and will change from time to time.

This has nothing to do with children's, teens', and seniors' areas in a branch, either.

The permanent infrastructure of public space is another matter entirely. A library, through its facilities, cannot show favouritism of any kind. That is why we make libraries accessible to people with disabilities: Engineering a library branch so disabled people cannot use it shows favouritism toward nondisabled people. Another word for favouritism in this context is "discrimination." Public space must not embody any form of discrimination.

Permanent religious symbols are intolerable in public space

A specific instance of the foregoing philosophy holds for religious symbolism. Religion can easily form part of a library's collection or be the subject of a display or exhibit, but religion absolutely cannot under any circumstances compose part of the permanent infrastructure of a library, which must maintain separation of church and state. Any permanent installation that prefers one religion constitutes favouritism or discrimination.

That is exactly what has happened at Thorncliffe branch. Carpets are a permanent form of infrastructure. It borders on impossible to replace carpets in a library branch, which has to be shut down entirely just to move shelves and other furnishings. Even if one disputed the permanence of a carpet, its degree is in no way comparable to the impermanence of a book or other item in a collection or of a display or exhibit. Thorncliffe's carpets are Islamic in form and intent and represent impermissible dedication of permanent public space to Islam.

This isn't just about religion in general

I assure you I would go out of my way to complain about the permanent presence of any religion at all, even Buddhism or Bahá'í, in public space. I would indeed object to Christian symbols. But I strenuously object to the presence of Islamic in specific because its radical wing represents an active threat to my life and, in fact, to your lives as educated liberal citizens of the West.

While Muslims per se are not a threat and neither is Islam per se, radical Islam is part of Islam and is made up of Muslims. I don't see Christian or Bahá'í activists banding together in groups of 18 to foment plans to storm Parliament and behead the prime minister. Nor do, say, Jews issue fatwas against apostates or anyone they decide is a blasphemer. Critics of, for example, Sikhism do not have to live and travel under armed guard. But all those are actually true of radical Islam.

Radical Islamic activists are an active threat to Canada, to Western civilization, and to democracy. They are not a respected "minority" that is part of the cherished "diversity" of Toronto; they are an extremist radical sect bent on mayhem and conquest. It is not your job, or the Toronto Public Library's job, to appease and accommodate Muslims or members of any religion. It is shocking and worrisome that the library would cede territory in one of its own branches to a religion whose most extreme adherents oppose every freedom a library represents.

That is exactly what has happened: Islam now owns territory (actual land) inside Thorncliffe branch. Stand on those Islamic carpets and you're standing on Muslim territory.

Let's understand what the problem is

This is the wrong moment for the Board to take contrived umbrage at this complaint and reaffirm some kind of vague multiculturalist ideal just to keep up appearances. What the Toronto Public Library has done is cede territory in one of its own branches to a religion. That in itself is discriminatory and leaves the Library open to litigation. The Library chose the worst possible religion to which to cede territory – Islam, whose most radical elements are an active and present threat to every other user of the library.

To say the same thing another way, this is not a chance for the Board to look more liberal than ever and support the right of Muslims to take over part of a library branch. The Toronto Public Library has violated the doctrine of separation of church and state (in this case, of mosque and state) and, through its permanent infrastructure, has displayed illegal and alarming favouritism for one religion.

This meeting of the Board is your chance, arguably the only one, to resolve the issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeedark".