

MANITOBA MULTIFAITH COUNCIL
October 7, 2016

The Summer of Discontent

The summer of 2016 has been a “summer of discontent” throughout much of the world, especially with respect to interreligious understanding.

Considerable shock and outrage has been expressed worldwide for the draconian behaviour of the French “fashion police” in the continental bikini/burkini affair. The burkini, a type of discreet swimwear worn by some Muslim women to preserve modesty, was banned in 30 French jurisdictions. Claiming the burkini breached the “respect of good morals and secularism,” a Muslim woman in Nice was fined and forced to publicly remove some of her clothing.

While French officials have stated the ban was a response to growing concerns about radical Islamic terrorism, the burkini is also worn by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women for the same reasons of modesty as well as by those who are concerned about skin-protection. There may be more ridiculous incidents of religious and cultural ignorance in history: but not many. However, there is a fine line between ignorance and racism.

One needs not travel far to witness challenges nearer to home: In September, a kirpan-wearing Sikh was denied service in a Winnipeg Dollarama store. As embarrassing as this must have been for the gentleman in question, the circumstances suggest misunderstanding rather than malevolence.

Not so recent events at the University of Alberta, the University of Lethbridge and most recently at the University of Calgary. On the U of A campus, a poster was circulated, directly attacking the Sikh community and the iconic turban, employing obscenities in a clear incident of hate speech.

A faculty member of the University of Lethbridge employed a Facebook account not only to deny the Holocaust or Shoah, and to suggest antisemitic conspiracy theories behind 9/11, but also to utter threats of the most infamous kind against the Jewish community.

In the third incident, about 40 posters appeared at various locations at the University of Calgary, similar to the ones at the U of A, but this time attacking Muslims.

The Manitoba Multifaith Council has existed for well over half a century to promote interreligious understanding and the building of a just and inclusive society.

We would ask the Universities of Alberta, Lethbridge and Calgary to state publicly, and nationally, what steps they will take to prevent such vile expressions of hate in the future. We ask this because the implications of these cases are far beyond provincial in scope, and to be prepared should such incidents manifest themselves in a Manitoba institution of higher learning.

To the business community of Manitoba, we offer our support in advancing interreligious understanding in the workplace.

Among our plans for the near future is the establishment of the Winnipeg Interfaith Business Initiative to encourage greater understanding of religious imperatives in the workplace.

We welcome all inquiries.

Belle Jarniewski, President, Manitoba Multifaith Council, liturgica@me.com
Dr. James Christie, Chair, Community Relations Committee, Manitoba Multifaith Council