HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Ed Ethics.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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Faith in Mr. D.:[1] Accommodating Religion in Schools

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"Happy Tuesday, Mr. D.," a student said cheerfully. The principal smiled and replied, "Hi, Karim. Shouldn't you be getting to class now?" But it was still ten minutes before the bell.

Peter Dikastis was distracted; it had been the most stressful month of his career. A scandal had broken out when he had allowed Friday *jummah* prayers to take place in the cafeteria of his public middle school. It had seemed like a perfect fix for a problem with both religious and educational dimensions: the adolescent students, especially the boys, had been leaving school each Friday at lunch time to attend prayers at the mosque and not returning for the rest of the school day. Teachers and other students were complaining about the disrupted class time. The school had a majority Muslim population and was located in an urban middle-class community full of immigrants from Pakistan, Iran, India, and other South Asian origins. The Friday *jummah* prayer, Peter had learned, is the most important one of the week for Muslims and was considered obligatory for males. When Mr. and Mrs. Farouk, the parents of a Grade 8 student, proposed that an imam visit the school and conduct the half-hour prayer on site, the principal jumped at the chance to accommodate his Muslim students and improve attendance at the same time. Mrs. Farouk and several of her friends took care of all the set-up and supervision. But the media descended on the school with a torrent of questions and sparked an angry public debate. Conservatives in particular were decrying the "mosqueteria" and the fact that the sermon, the *khutbah*, was delivered in Arabic. Some warned that the sermon could contain intolerant messages, or even recruit students to violent causes. Commenters on news websites told Muslim immigrants to "go back to their home country." Police apprehended a person who had posted flyers outside the school offering a reward of $1000 for a video of students praying in the cafeteria. Meanwhile, liberal columnists worried about the blurring of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Peter had grown up in Canada and thought its multiculturalism policy was straightforward. He was quickly learning otherwise.

The previous week, the board's superintendent had issued a press release saying that the in-school prayers would be suspended while the school explored its options. Last Friday at the designated prayer time, some 100 students gathered in the schoolyard and prayed in peaceful protest of the policy's suspension, while outside groups, including the Jewish Defense League and a Hindu nationalist group, sparred with Muslim parents on the sidewalk. One thing Peter knew for certain: he didn't want that chaos and tension again this week. The superintendent told Peter privately that she would support whatever he decided—and that she would check in at the end of the day.

At 9:00 sharp, the bell rang and Mr. and Mrs. Farouk knocked on the principal's door. He swallowed and tried to remind himself what he had prepared. "Mr. and Mrs. Farouk," he began, "I am so grateful for your advice, but as you know—"

[1] This case is based on real events and includes some direct quotes from the media and stakeholders, but all the characters portrayed here are fictitious.

“We have another solution,” Mr. Farouk interrupted. “We see that bringing the imam into the school over the last few weeks caused too much controversy. We have a son in high school – you remember Khalid – who is a *hafez*. He can lead the service.”

Peter paused as he digested this idea. “Would the sermon still be in Arabic?” he inquired.

Mrs. Farouk recoiled slightly, but it was Mr. Farouk who answered firmly, “Yes, it must be in Arabic.”

The principal thought this over. The proposal was certainly less likely to provoke outrage than the first iteration of prayers in the cafeteria, with the imam at the head. And it would satisfy the goal of letting observant students pray without leaving school. But he wasn’t sure it was just the imam’s presence that made this issue inflammatory. He was responsible for everything that happened on school property. How could he be sure that the high school prayer leaders were following board policies

Mrs. Farouk, who had been silent until now, seemed to read Peter’s thoughts. “Mr. Dikastis, we see that this is not easy. But surely you are familiar with the school board’s accommodation policies.”

He had re-read the policy so many times in the last several weeks that he could recite it from memory. *Accommodation is considered appropriate if it promotes equal educational opportunity and meets the individual’s creed-related needs*. The policy was sensible enough, and it followed from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He just wasn’t so certain what ‘equal’ meant here.

“Of course, of course,” Peter replied. “As you know, we have the largest middle school Muslim Students’ Association in the city.” Peter was especially proud of the school’s positive reputation in the community. Just a few years earlier, he had navigated some delicate conversations about a new sex education curriculum by working closely with parents who had religious objections to the material. The media had praised him then. “But I’ve heard from some other parents….” He trailed off. Perhaps this wasn’t the right time to mention other parents.

“Yes?” Mr. Farouk asked, seemingly ready to solve any challenge.

“Well,” the principal continued, “it’s just that I’m not sure we accommodate the non-Muslim students so well. At least one Hindu student missed a field trip last year that coincided with Diwali, and we didn’t accommodate him.”

“Mr. Dikastis,” Mr. Farouk said, “everyone is equal. But 400 of the 550 students at this school are Muslim. And *jummah* prayers can only be performed in a congregation. The Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, said that offering Friday prayers is equivalent to one entire year of praying and fasting alone. This Diwali story is not the same thing.”

Peter wasn’t sure what to say. He stood up and extended his hand. Mr. Farouk shook it firmly. As the parents walked to the principal’s door, Mrs. Farouk turned around and said, “We all want our children to stay in school.”

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As the lunch bell rang, Jennifer Armstrong and Celeste Duval settled into the staff room with their sandwiches.

“Can you believe this thing about the Friday prayers?” Jennifer said, pushing aside a newspaper. She was

a perky early-career math teacher known for her wit.

Celeste, a mid-career French teacher, rolled her eyes. "I know! They're making such a big deal out of it! But now I can finally teach my fifth period class on Friday. Before they fixed this, I'd be teaching to a half-empty classroom and have to repeat everything on Monday."

Jennifer put down her sandwich. "Celeste, it *is* a big deal! Those prayers are *sexist.* Do you know they make the girls stand behind the boys?"

Just then Peter walked in the staffroom and dropped a stack of envelopes on the table. "What are you two talking about?"

Jennifer turned to the principal and explained, "I was just saying to Celeste that you were right to call off the prayers in the cafeteria."

"Well, they haven't been called off exactly…" he answered.

"Good!" Celeste said. "I don't mind students leaving class for half an hour. I don't want them to disappear for the whole afternoon!"

"If the prayers only take half an hour," Jennifer shot back, "then why can't they go to the mosque and come right back? Why are we making a whole big fuss to accommodate students who are cutting class? We should be giving them detentions!"

"We thought of that," Peter replied. "The mosque is too far away to walk. And the bus only comes every 40 minutes. The timing has to be exactly right for them to get back for sixth period, and even then, they would still miss all of fifth period."

"Speaking of periods," Jennifer continued, her voice rising, "did you know that menstruating girls are not allowed to participate in the service? It's so obviously sexist."

Peter took a breath. Jennifer was echoing some of the toughest points he had encountered in the recent public backlash. Gender equality was as important in the board's equity policy as religious equality. In fact, in the last two years alone, Peter had attended three PD days on accommodating trans and non-binary students. Now he had the kids divided into two sexes, with the boys in front, in his own cafeteria. It didn't sit right.

"Jennifer," Celeste prodded, "you were raised evangelical. Are you going to tell me that we shouldn't accommodate our religious students because they treat men and women differently? All religions do."

"But school is supposed to be a secular space," Jennifer insisted, "where kids can figure out who they are."

"I agree with you on that," Celeste said. But it's not our place to tell people how to figure out their religion. In fact, when prayers were only at the mosque, more boys went than girls. Now there's more equal opportunity."

"More opportunity? Or more pressure?" Jennifer asked rhetorically, tossing her sandwich wrapper in the garbage.

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The bell rang. Peter was grateful for an hour alone in his office, without any meetings.

But a few minutes later there was a knock on the door and Zahra Suleimani approached his desk. Zahra was a straight-A student and the Secretary-Treasurer of the MSA.

She began, "Sir, I heard that some people have been talking about girls sitting behind the boys at *jummah*. I just wanted to tell you – "

"Yes?" Peter asked.

"I just want to pray and honestly I don't even want to pray in front of the boys and have them see me from behind."

"Thank you, Zahra, that's good to know. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Zahra hesitated a moment, then said, "Well, Mr. D., it's just, as you know I'm Secretary-Treasurer of the MSA and I do a lot of the organizing and stuff, but… well, Hassan said I shouldn't talk to journalists about the cafeteria prayers."

Peter was perplexed; Zahra had spoken so articulately to the local news at last week's protest. Why would Hassan, the President of the MSA, be anything but proud? He motioned for her to elaborate. "It's just, he said I wasn't dressed very…religiously, and that it made us look bad."

As Peter absorbed this information, Zahra quickly continued, "Never mind, I shouldn't have said anything. You know, a lot of people don't understand what Muslims are like. I love my faith and I just want everyone to be respected."

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Peter was glad to be spending his evening in good company. Mitch Gallagher and Steven Fromm were two of Peter's closest friends. Mitch was a lawyer at the Ministry of Education, and Steven was Vice Principal at a private Jewish school. Peter was also glad that his wife, Arlene, had met them at the restaurant after work.

"So how's life in the eye of the storm?" Mitch teased, taking a sip of his drink.

Peter sighed. "I'm trying to accommodate everyone," he explained, "but I seem to keep running into limits."

"It's one of the reasons I moved to a parochial school," Steven said. "At my old school in the public board, they tried to accommodate me and the few dozen Jewish students, but they kept scheduling assessments on Jewish holidays, there was no kosher food in the cafeteria, and all the extra-curricular tournaments ran on Saturday – *shabbat*. It's a Christian system, whether they call it that or not. You have your hands tied."

"Being Christian doesn't mean being exclusionary," Mitch retorted. "All the schools in the province are required to provide a multi-faith room – even Catholic schools!"

In the Canadian province where Peter lived, Catholic schools were fully funded from kindergarten through to Grade 12. No other religious denomination had any public education funding.

"A multi-faith room doesn't solve this, though," Peter replied. "The only way for our Muslim students to

fulfill their religious obligations is to go to mosque during school hours – or to bring the mosque to the school."

"Or change school hours!" Mitch joked.

"Exactly my point!" said Steven. "Public schools can't run on twelve different clocks. Maybe these students should move to an Islamic school?"

"That puts a completely unfair burden on religious minorities," Mitch replied. "Not everyone can afford to go to a school like yours. The public system may still run on a Christian schedule, but it's our job to make schools inclusive for everyone."

"That puts an unfair burden on school administrators!" Peter cried, surprised at his own fervour. "Why should only Catholic schools be funded? Maybe the solution is to fund all religious schools, and then families can choose." Arlene squeezed his shoulder.

"You know that's not going to happen, Peter," Mitch said. "It's in the Constitution and no politician wants to touch it. We have to give Muslim students equal opportunity – even if the Catholic students can go to mass without leaving the school."

"And get credit for it!" Arlene piped in.

"Well, yeah," Mitch said. "It's an exception to the separation of church and state. Catholic schools get to endorse Catholicism. But Peter can accommodate these students without endorsing Islam."

"I don't know if I can," Peter confessed. "I don't understand Arabic; does that mean I'm endorsing what they're saying in prayers?"

"Have you thought about asking them to provide a translation of the service?" Steven asked.

"Then he'd really have to answer for whatever they're saying in there!" Arlene said.

"People say all sorts of things on school property," Mitch pointed out. "Peter doesn't endorse all of it. He doesn't even speak French! Does that mean they have to cancel French classes?"

"That's different," Arlene said. "They're not praying in French class."

"But students pray in the multi-faith room," Mitch reminded her. "Why is this different?"

Peter's phone rang. The call display showed the name of the superintendent. What should he decide about Friday prayers?