

Exemption of Hookah from the Smoking Ban¹

Occasion: A law banning smoking in restaurants and coffee shops had gone into effect, but the practice of hookah smoking could continue because it was alleged to be associated with Islam.

Since when can the cultural activity of one group be exempted from law when the same cultural activity of another is banned? More specifically, how can the hookah smoking tradition be allowed to continue, when smoking tobacco in restaurants and coffee shops has just been banned? How can a majority custom be banned while a similar custom practiced by a tiny minority is allowed to continue?

The custom in question may be practised by Muslims, but it has nothing to do with Islam. It is an Eastern and North African custom in which non-Muslims also participate.

I have lived among Muslims for 30 years and have written several books on the religion. But I have never seen anyone engaged in Hookah in the country I lived. In other words, even among Muslims, it is only a regional practice.

This is about customs, not religion. Now these two are often so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. However, if Hookah involves tobacco or anything else addictive or damaging to the body, it is even anti-Islamic.

I, too, am an immigrant to Canada. There are things about Canadian culture that offend me and things about my original culture that I hold precious. I have to live with the things that offend me, unless I can find a way of changing them by *legitimate* and *acceptable* means. I practise my precious native customs in so far as I do not offend the locals. Where these do offend locals, I discontinue them. If I cannot live with these restrictions, I should go to a place where I can feel more comfortable.

In a slightly different context, some say that such an argument is racist! Get off the pot! *That* claim is racist!

¹Unpublished Letter to Editor of *The Province*, 24 Sept/2007.