

The Extraordinary Case Of The Pagan And The Multicultural Prayer Room

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An extraordinary — one might almost say unbelievable — industrial tribunal case in Manchester in March gave a rare insight into how attempts to accommodate “multicultural” religious needs at work actually appear only to apply to Muslims. It developed around a spat between Muslim employees at the Royal Mail and a member of the Odinist Fellowship (a group that apparently worships the old Nordic gods).

The case — Royal Mail group PLC versus Donald Holden — was described in a document posted on the TUC website by Robin Jackson, the information officer of the Odinist Fellowship, who attended both days of the hearing. Mr Jackson reported:

“Many of you will be surprised, as I was, to learn that, increasingly, employers with a large proportion of Muslim staff are being obliged to set aside rooms in the workplace for Muslim prayers, and to allow their employees to take time away from their duties to engage in these prayers. At the Mail Centre where Donald worked, there was just such a room, which was designated as a ‘Multicultural Room’. That is important, because never, at any time, did the Royal Mail claim that the Room was solely for Muslim use, or that non-Muslims might not use it for their own purposes.”

Mr Holden tried to use the room for his own religious purposes – which is ostensibly what it was for – but it quickly became apparent that it was, in reality, a Muslim Club Room, full of Korans and prayer calendars. Mr Holden left sheets of paper about Odinism in the room, on a chair by the sink.

One item of evidence at the tribunal was a book which required users of the room to sign for a key on entering and leaving. Mr Holden’s visits were always of short duration, and mainly on a Saturday, when the place was mostly empty. Mr Jackson takes up the story:

“I was able to see for myself, that certain names and signatures, evidently belonging to Muslim employees, recurred time and time again in the signing-in book, sometimes three or four times in a single shift, and that the duration of their stays was half an hour or more. Some would call this ‘skiving’.”

Obviously Mr Holden’s use of the room was not welcomed by the Muslim employees and eventually an anonymous complaint was made to the management that a “muddy footprint had been left on the carpet of the Multicultural Room.” As Mr Jackson reports: “What could this mean? There could be only one possible interpretation: quite clearly, the culprit had intended to attack the Muslim religion. And not only was it, self-evidently, an anti-Muslim footprint, but on closer examination it became obvious that it must have been an anti-Islamic boot; and no doubt that anti-Islamic boot had been wielded by an Islamophobic foot. And who else could that Islamophobic foot belong to? The principle suspect had to be Donald, of course!”

Incredibly, the Royal Mail set up hidden cameras in the room to trap the culprit who was causing

the 'damage'. After five months of this surveillance – no doubt costing thousands of pounds – the management admitted that they had nothing on Mr Holden. In fact, during the tribunal hearing, no-one could be found who had actually seen the muddy footprint.

But the Royal Mail management did see Mr Holden in the room, leaving his literature on the chair by the sink and briefly appearing to pray. Then, on 23 February 2005, Mr Holden was hauled before the Royal Mail management to explain his actions. He was unsure at this point what he had done that needed explanation. None of the managers could agree what exactly his offence had been. Nevertheless, despite the vagueness of it all, he was suspended from work, accused of “religiously aggravated harassment directed against the Muslim faith”.

The investigating officer claimed it was because he was leaving his Odinist literature in the room, and suggested to Mr Holden that he was not a real believer and that there was no such religion as Odinism. He also confiscated Mr Holden’s religious literature and destroyed it. Imagine what would have happened if he had done that to Islamic literature!

However, Mr Holden’s suspension from the Royal Mail continued, and after a failed appeal, he eventually took action under the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003. The Royal Mail then dismissed him. He had worked for them for thirty-three years with a completely unblemished record. He lost his pension rights and his livelihood. And all because, the Royal Mail said, he walked on the carpet in the “Multicultural Room”, with his shoes on.

The Tribunal heard this tale with incredulity and decided that Mr Holden had been unfairly dismissed, and ordered the Royal Mail to pay a substantial compensation package likely to run into six figures.

Another outcome of this extraordinary case is that Odinism is now a legally recognised religion – and, by extension, so are all pagan religions.

See also: [*The Odinist Fellowship*](#).

[*Read a full account here*](#)

[*Senior CofE Bishop says multiculturalism is destroying Christianity in Britain*](#)
