



Silencing Voices of the Nations in Yonge-Dundas Square is a 'dagger in heart of free expression'

When does expressing your opinions and beliefs turn into proselytizing?

In Toronto, it depends on whether city bureaucrats like your message.

Yonge-Dundas Square is used by Muslims, Hindus, marijuana enthusiasts, the LGTBQ+ community, and many others, to proclaim their beliefs, share their culture, promote their lifestyle, and advocate for their cause.

Toronto typically takes a hands off approach to the actual content of the message being promoted at Yonge-Dundas Square.

In a free society, that is how it should be. Because the public square belongs to all people, the City's only role should be to regulate which groups get to use the square at what times. As long as the group is peaceful (even if perhaps loud), citizens are free to accept or reject the message or opinion being proclaimed on any given day.

Toronto's usual tolerance was tossed out the window last month when the city denied the Christian group Voices of the Nations the right to continue using Yonge-Dundas Square for its annual musical festival.

Voices of the Nations describes its mission as "to provide a venue and unite the various denominations, cultures and the outstanding talents within the Christian community" and "to embrace and celebrate the wonderful diversity in the city." Their annual musical event showcases the talents of numerous performing groups and artists from a broad cross-section of the Christian community.

According to the Yonge-Dundas Square events manager Natalie Belman, Voices of the Nations can't use the square in 2016 because it "proselytizes" through songs that praise Jesus. Belman claims that "it doesn't matter if it's speaking or singing. Either way if you're praising Jesus or praise the Lord ... that's proselytizing."

If the city applied that logic consistently, it would deny usage of this square to the "Prince of Pot" marijuana activist Marc Emery, to Hindus chanting Hare Krishna worship praises, and to numerous Pride events.

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, who is on the Yonge-Dundas Square management board, insists that the policy against proselytizing is in place to make sure that all people, regardless of their faith, feel welcome. Yet she herself spoke at a rally on April 20, 2015, held in support of legalizing marijuana. How "welcome" would a person opposed to legalizing marijuana have felt at that rally, where hundreds of people lit up joints? How "welcome" would Kurds, Armenians and Greeks feel at the Toronto Turkish Festival? Would a global warming skeptic feel "welcome" at the Toronto Green Festival at Yonge-Dundas Square?

A policy that bans expression that fails to make everyone feel "welcome", if enforced equally against all groups, would prevent the vast majority of people from using Yonge-Dundas Square.

By the city's definition, proselytizing is something almost all Canadians do every day, whether they realize it or not. Telling a friend how yoga reduces stress and anxiety is proselytizing that is no different from telling a friend how church reduces stress and anxiety.

Any time someone advocates for an ideal, recruits for a cause, or promotes a belief, proselytizing is taking place.

The city's policy, requiring that performances and displays "must not advocate a specific political or religious point of view for the purpose of proselytizing" empowers bureaucrats to selectively censor any message they may disagree with. So advocacy for Islam, Hinduism, LGBTQ+ issues, marijuana, and environmentalism is OK, but preaching the Christian gospel is not.

The policy against "proselytizing" thrusts a cold dagger into the heart of free expression, allowing bureaucrats to nit-pick and hair-split, according to their own personal preferences, about which political, religious and cultural expressions are "proselytizing" and which are not.

The solution is to allow all peaceful expression by all groups of all religions, all cultures, and all political persuasions. Anything less flies in the face of the charter freedom, as defined by the Supreme Court of Canada, "to declare religious beliefs openly and without fear of hindrance or reprisal, and the right to manifest religious belief by worship and practice or by teaching and dissemination."

Lawyer John Carpay is president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (www.jccf.ca), which represents Voices of the Nations in an impending court action against the City of Toronto.