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## NEWS LOCAL

# People of other faiths not offended: experts



By Tori Stafford, Kingston Whig-Standard  
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As families string lights and stores display Christmas trees, it truly is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

But for those of non-Christian faith, what feelings are attached to the annual onslaught of events, music and decorations that honour the Christian holiday?

"I would say that most Jewish Canadians are, if anything, accustomed to beautiful Christmas decorations in a public setting," said Steve McDonald, associate director of communications for the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, which represents the organized Jewish community in Canada. "I've certainly never heard of any requests for them to be removed from the Jewish community."

Though the subject is a controversial one for some, McDonald said he doesn't think Jewish Canadians see it that way.

"I think most Jews are respectful of the fact that Christmas does carry an important religious meaning for practising Christians

across the country, and, beyond that, I think that Christmas speaks to universal values that people of all faiths can connect with - a sense of generosity, goodwill, joy and peace," he said. "It's just a time for family and reflection. I think everyone appreciates the beautiful aspects of Christmas."

Vinay Singh is a practising Hindu who is the vice-president of the India-Canadian Association of Kingston. He is also an associate professor at Queen's University in the department of biomedical and molecular science.

Although he moved to Canada from India just a decade ago, Christmas is something he's known all his life.

"I can very strongly say that, from my growing up and my understanding, there is no objections or no issues with celebrations or putting up decorations in public places," Singh said, noting that there are provinces in India that are predominantly Christian.

Singh said both he and his wife learned about Christmas in school when they were in India. The couple attended two different school systems, neither of which were Catholic, and students were encouraged to bring in sweets and gifts to exchange at this time of year.

"In fact, in our school boards, you have stories about Christmas or stories about Santa," he said.

Having lived as a practising Buddhist for the past decade, Roberta Lamb said she takes no issue with decorations from other faiths in public areas - especially if those decorations light up the cold, dark winter nights of Canada.

"To me, it's about what makes people happy, and if people enjoy decorations on the streets, if they enjoy a lit-up Christmas tree by the skating rink in the square, that's just fine," Lamb said.

She also noted she doesn't think it's necessary to prohibit Christmas decorations in these areas.

"I don't think that it would serve any benefit to society to say we're not going to have any decorations in public spaces," she said.

For Imam Sikander Hashmi, Christmas decorations are not something he, as a Muslim, finds offensive at all, he said.

"Living in a pluralistic, multicultural society, I think we should all expect that each group and members of different faith and cultural communities will want to celebrate their holidays . and decorate and do things like that," said Hashmi. For him, the only stipulation would be that everyone have the opportunity to decorate and celebrate during their own holidays.

"We need to be practical and we need to appreciate the fact that people are different," he said. "That needs to be celebrated in different ways, and one of those is to put up decorations."

Hashmi said it doesn't bother him that public places decorate for Christmas but not for other holidays. However, he said if a public building does decorate at Christmas time, that building should be open to allowing those of other faiths decorate during other holiday seasons.

"Say there are Muslims working there, or people of other cultures," Hashmi said. "If they want to put something up, I think they should have the opportunity to do that."

Though it may be obvious that Archdeacon Wayne Varley supports the use of Christmas decorations in public space, his reasoning for why this practice shouldn't be prohibited sheds light on embracing the similarities and differences of the country's numerous faiths.

"I find the prohibition to be rather pointless because whether folks are observing Christmas or not, there is a time of cultural relevance at this time of year, and it's therefore reasonable to expect that there will be decorations, some attractive, and others less so, perhaps," he said with a laugh.

Varley, who serves as the diocesan executive officer for the Anglican Diocese of Ontario, said neither he nor the Anglican church have any problem with other religions celebrating their holidays publicly.

"From the church perspective, we view Christmas within the context of the time being a significant religious period for us in the birth of Christ . but if it's held within a healthy, spiritual context, we would have no problem with decorations at all."

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When it comes to getting into the Christmas spirit, public agencies walk a tightrope as they decide what is appropriate.

Publicly funded organizations that must be especially sensitive to respecting the sensitivities of minorities must balance that with honouring the traditions of a Christian majority.

This week, that line was drawn at 'No' by Tri-Board Student

Transportation Services, the organization that manages school buses for five school boards in the region. When Tri-Board reminded operators of a longstanding policy of no decorations, period, it set off a firestorm of public criticism.

To find out where and how that line is established throughout the community, the Whig-Standard's Tori Stafford asked several public bodies what their policies are when it comes to decorating at Christmastime.

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#### Limestone District School Board

The board allows Christmas decorations and celebrations in schools and classrooms, Director of Education Brenda Hunter said.

"Our goal is to be inclusive and not exclusive, and to take the opportunity that December holidays provide to learn about and celebrate the differences and commonalities among beliefs and customs, cultures, celebrations," she said.

"Finding similarities between different cultures and religions is a great way to raise a generation of students who are tolerant, accepting of one another and committed to peace and understanding."

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#### Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board

Ann Boniferro, co-ordinator of religious and family life studies, said that as a Roman Catholic board, schools celebrate all the Christian holidays.

"It's quite common that in our schools right now there will be advent decorations," she said. "We certainly would have Christmas-related decorations, and through Lent and Easter seasons, there'll be decorations in our school, both as decorations and also as symbols that accompany prayer and liturgy."

"We stick to the Christian and Catholic holidays because we are a Catholic school board," she said of having decorations for other religious holidays. "Although, we see our roots in the Judeo-Christian religion, so there will be things related to the Jewish faith that would also be common in our Catholic tradition."

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#### City of Kingston

Existing policies do not prohibit seasonal decorating, according to Cindie Ashton, director of communications for the city.

Ashton noted that the city already has Christmas decorations up, including a nativity scene in Confederation Park.

All city-run buildings, such as the Invista Centre and the Grand Theatre, are fully allowed to decorate for any season.

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#### Kingston Frontenac Public Libraries

Libraries throughout the system have decorations and book displays for every major holiday, Barbara Love, manager of adult services, said.

"It doesn't look like we have a policy, but we do have Christmas decorations up at all of our branches," she said.

Love noted that libraries allow for decorations from the holidays of any religion or faith.

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#### Macdonald-Cartier Building

At the downtown home of the Ministry of Health and Kingston's Ontario Court of Justice, "we don't have a policy, other than that you can't bring a live tree in here," said John Howard, representative of the building's landlord.

"We don't have a particular policy pro or against, actually."

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#### Kingston Post Office

The post office has nothing against putting up Christmas decorations, said Mike Hornbeck, supervisor of letter carriers.

"The only policy that we would have is that it has to be safe and it has to be appropriate, non-offensive," he said.

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#### Queen's University

There are Christmas decorations on and in some building around campus.

"I've looked for a policy on this, and talked to quite a few people, and there's not one as far as we know," said Michael Onesi of the university's communications department.

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#### St. Lawrence College

The college doesn't have a policy, according to Steve Holmgren, director of human resources and organizational development.

"It's never been an issue with us and we haven't had any complaints," he said, adding that there are a few Christmas decorations around the college.

"Certainly as a public sector institution, we're guided by the entire human rights code and the Occupational Health and Safety Act, so we're very mindful of all those requirements.

"We allow the individual, certainly, to profess their faith as they see fit, accordingly."

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#### Hotel Dieu Hospital

As you'd expect of an organization founded by the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph, Hotel Dieu celebrates Christmas.

"We do put up Christmas trees and have celebrations to that effect," said Elizabeth Bardon, chief of public relations and communications.

"Recognizing that there are lots of different faiths in our community, we also have a lot of things in place to try to support and recognize people who have different faiths."

To that end, the hospital has a pastoral care advisory committee that includes representatives from a number of different faith groups."

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#### Kingston General Hospital

The hospital does permit the use of Christmas and other holiday or festive decorations.

"We recognize that being in a hospital, especially during the holidays, can be an anxious time for patients and families, and the use of festive decorations can often help lift spirits," said Karen Smith, communications specialist.

"In fact, a staff committee organizes a much-anticipated annual decorating contest to help spread some cheer to those spending time at KGH over the holidays.

"Patients, staff and visitors who wish to post decorations must follow guidelines set out in hospital policies. All lights and decorations, for example, must be CSA approved and must not impede with fire, safety and security regulations or devices."

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