

ASK THE RELIGION EXPERTS

An extended version of my response to the weekly question for the Ask The Religion Experts feature in the Ottawa Citizen. We hope this will generate thoughtful reflection of real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.

Saturday, Sept. 8, 2012

Q : Should students be allowed proclaim their religion on a T-shirt at school?

A Religious expression in schools remains a contentious issue, one requiring more discussion before decisions about T-shirts can be made. Although some school jurisdictions attempt to define themselves as isolated religion-free islands, it does not seem consistent with the role of the school system in preparing young people for adult life to attempt to purge the school environment of any religious expression at all.

For most people, student years span as much as one quarter of our lives. This represents huge and radical transformation as a person grows from a dependent toddler to a mature and independent adult. During that time, the individual's understanding and expression of any religious dimension in their lives similarly expands and deepens in the direction of a mature and thoughtful belief system. Therefore, religious expression will be a different matter for a five-year-old, a 15-year-old, and the 25-year-old. Were there to be rules about expressive clothing, they would need to account for this differential.

Assuming religious expression were permitted in the school environment, I would wonder whether a T-shirt is a particularly effective medium for religious ideas. Typically, shirt-space is most suitable for slogans, cartoons, media-idol representations or sports team affiliation. Religious expression hardly seems appropriate. I understand that some individuals use that space for provocation, a means of pushing religious preference or doctrine at

those who may have no interest. In this sense, such expression is more related to billboards, unwanted phone solicitations or spam e-mail. These are more like pushy marketing than proclamation, and should be treated as such.

It is also worth noting here that religious message T-shirts differ fundamentally from wearing religious clothing, such as a headscarf, ceremonial item or hairstyle. In these cases, such apparel conforms to the requirements of the individual's broader religious community, and is deserving of respect and permission.

The content of any religious message is also worth considering. For example, there is a difference between some declaration that "I am a Buddhist" and a warning "if you are not a Buddhist, you are going to hell". Further, one slogan, motto or short quote may be presented entirely out of context and either be misused or misunderstood. Given that the development in the years before the 20s includes the development of judgment and discretion, we cannot assume that the messages selected for display would be carefully thought out or suitably respectful.

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<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/ask-the-religion-experts/index.html#>

All my past columns are available online at:

<http://www.realperson.com/ARE.htm>

We invite you to consider this response and share your own on our Red Maple Leaflet blog at:

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