Religious Intolerance against Somali Muslim Immigrants at the Workplace

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Religious intolerance manifests itself in many forms. It can present itself as violence, intolerant rhetoric, or even subtle behaviors and attitudes. Sometimes, intolerance is so subtly masked that those surrounding the perpetrator do not even recognize the religious intolerance he displays. Historically, religious intolerance has existed since the existence of religion itself. From the days of the ancient kings of Egypt, who displayed religious intolerance to gain power over their enemies, to the modern day, where businesses spread intolerant rumors about new religious movements (NRMs) instilling fear in individuals while simultaneously eliminating their competitors, intolerance undergoes cycles of its existence cropping up in many different societies and cultures.

In the United States, many inhabitants have a false sense of security regarding religious intolerance. Regarding their country as the land of freedom and opportunity, they choose to ignore flaws within the societal structure of their nation, many of which still spark religious intolerance today. That “founding myth” of a new world free from oppression, a nation that would grant people liberty from Europe’s tyranny, still exists at the forefront of their minds (Corrigan and Neal 3). However, if one delves deeply enough, he will find many instances of religious intolerance scattered throughout America’s history. What is even more disturbing is that this intolerance is still existent today, but is seldom recognized by the general public.

To uncover the truth, I decided to run a simple Google search into religious intolerance in the tri-state region around Cincinnati, OH and was shocked to find numerous instances of conflict within the last few decades. A white supremacist, anti-Jewish man was recently executed for numerous targeted synagogue shootings and countless murders, two of which were young boys from Cincinnati (Associated Press). An ex-police officer from Norton, Ohio filed a federal law-suit allegedly claiming to have been fired for converting to Islam (Meyer). One story that I found particularly interesting was the story of a group of Muslim workers who were fired from their jobs slightly over one month ago for exercising their civil rights to practice their religion during their work hours (Man Files Discrimination Lawsuit against Westerville Company). This story was based in Cincinnati and was even more intriguing as there was a parallel event that occurred approximately a year and half ago in Westerville, OH, a town near Columbus, OH. Wanting to know more, I decided to look deeper into these two instances of intolerance, and what I discovered was shocking. These workers faced far more than the loss of their jobs; what they faced was a threat to their personal, religious, and moral identities in a setting where these essential aspects are supposed to be protected by Civil Rights Laws. Furthermore, the parallels between the two instances, both of which occurred barely a year apart from each other, are uncanny and lead me to question how complete the American movement toward religious freedom really is and why these instances of blatant intolerance still exist in the workplace when there are laws in place that forbid them.

Yusuf Sufi, a native of Somalia, was fired from the Columbus branch of Exel, a German-originated packaging and mailing company, in May 2012, when he requested his break hour be shifted on Friday evenings to accommodate to his prayer times. Sufi did not demand any extra break hours; he merely requested for a change in the timing of his already existing break hour for his religious needs. Initially, the company was flexible with him, but the management of his branch changed, and with that change came a whole new attitude. The company removed the flexible break policy entirely and refused to accommodate him any longer, and when he insisted, he was fired (Man Files Discrimination Lawsuit against Westerville Company). The Columbus chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-OH) filed a lawsuit on behalf of Sufi with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC): "This is not the first time Exel has discriminated against employees when they have asked for religious accommodation. Our office filed 18 charges of discrimination with the EEOC last month relating to the denial of religious accommodation for Muslim employees who worked at the same facility at which Mr. Sufi worked," said CAIR-OH Legal Director Jennifer Nimer. "This pattern of discriminatory behavior continues to be a problem at Exel" ([CAIR-OH Files Federal Religious Discrimination Suit against Exel, Inc.](http://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/11818-cair-oh-files-federal-religious-discrimination-suit-against-exel-inc.html)). The EEOC has begun investigations of Sufi’s allegations but has not yet completed its study of the situation, although Exel has made it clear that it will not participate in any mediation with Sufi ([CAIR-OH Files Federal Religious Discrimination Suit against Exel, Inc.](http://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/11818-cair-oh-files-federal-religious-discrimination-suit-against-exel-inc.html)). Vice President of Communications for Exel, Lynn Anderson stated, “Exel has not terminated anyone for religious practices or requests for accommodations…Exel goes to great lengths to ensure employees' religious practices are understood and, as appropriate, accommodated.  In both policy and practice, Exel has established a culture in which discrimination of any kind is not tolerated" (Man Files Discrimination Lawsuit against Westerville Company). Investigations surrounding religious discrimination allegations are a long process and will likely require the EEOC to interview every one of the 18 other clients that approached CAIR-OH with similar complaints to Sufi’s. Furthermore, thorough investigations in Exel, especially at the Columbus headquarters, will have to be made before further legal action can be taken.

The EEOC states that any employer who employs 15 or more people is subject to EEOC regulations, except in the case of age discrimination, in which that requirement is 20 employees (About EEOC: Overview). One of the laws enforced by the EEOC is Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which requires that “employers reasonably accommodate applicants' and employees' sincerely held religious practices, unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business” (Laws Enforced by EEOC). By firing Sufi and the 18 other Somali Muslims for insubordination in refusing to comply to Exel’s demands that they not pray at their religiously dictated hour, Exel is in clear violation of the Civil Rights Act and can be apprehended as such. The situations surrounding Sufi and the 18 other former Exel employees contain two main hallmarks of masked religious intolerance that avoids attention of the public eye. It does not use violence, which would be a certain ticket straight to much faster legal action and public attention, but rather uses more subtle methods of discrimination. First, there is a repetitive trend; if one employee filed a complaint with CAIR on a religious discriminatory issue, there would be room for suspicion on both ends. However, it is highly unlikely that 18 complaints from the same branch on the same issue would arise in the time span of two years without any merit. Secondly, there is intolerant rhetoric involved; Sufi describes his experience during his appeal to the Exel management: “The manager say ‘If you go pray, you fired’...I feels bad,” (Man Files Discrimination Lawsuit against Westerville Company). Furthermore, Roman Iqbal, Sufi’s attorney, confirmed that Sufi was not allowed to appeal his case with the human resources department at Exel and was eventually fired when he directly disobeyed the manager’s instructions to not pray at his religiously dictated time (Man Files Discrimination Lawsuit against Westerville Company). This incident is just one of many examples of passive intolerance toward Islam, but nonetheless, it is a serious blow to Muslim immigrants who come to America searching for opportunities they did not possess before and also to the US’s founding goal of implementing religious freedom without persecution.

The second example of religious intolerance that I researched displays a disconcerting amount of parallels to the Exel scenario. DHL Global Mail is also a German-originated mailing and packaging company that often hires immigrants for blue-collar job positions. 24 Somali Muslim workers, all of whom had legal working status in the US were fired in October 2013 on the grounds of insubordination. They, like Yusuf Sufi, wanted their Friday break hour moved to a different time in the evening so that they could use it for prayers. They were denied this request. These workers disobeyed their superiors and held their prayer session regardless of the rules and were subsequently fired. So far 11 out of an expected 24 complaints have been filed with the Cincinnati chapter of CAIR (CAIR-CIN). All of these former employees stated that they had originally been offered a flexible hour requirement, which was suddenly revoked without explanation. When the employees appealed to their superiors, they were fired for insubordination (Curnutte). DHL Global Mail is bound by the same regulations as Exel; they are legally required to abide by all the components of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964: “CAIR has informed the company of its obligation under the law to reasonably accommodate these workers' religious practices,” said CAIR-CIN Executive Director Karen Dabdoub. “Instead of abiding by the law and doing the right thing, DHL has decided to stand behind their violation of these workers' civil rights” (CAIR-Cincinnati to Announce EEOC Complaints against DHL for Firing 24 Muslim Workers over Prayers). Similarly to Exel, DHL Global Mail denies any of these accusations. Bea Garcia, Director of Media Relations for DHL Global Mail states, “DHL Global Mail denies any wrongdoing with respect to the allegations made by CAIR-Cincinnati and will fully defend itself in any action that may be filed against the company” (Discrimination Complaint Filed against DHL Global Mail).

There are some very obvious parallels between the Exel and DHL Global Mail scenarios. Both of them exhibit many of the same hallmarks of religious intolerance toward the same ethnic and religious group of people. An especially interesting fact is that both of these companies are related by more than the services they provide; they are actually both owned by the same parent company, Deutsche Post DHL, which is a German-based logistics business. However, in response to the DHL Global Mail scandal earlier this month, Exel responded that it has absolutely no relation to DHL Global Mail other than sharing the same parent company (Discrimination Complaint Filed against DHL Global Mail). While this statement seems farfetched taking into account the similarities in their management and practices, even setting aside that relationship still shows an almost perfect overlap in all the events that occurred in both scenarios. Both scenarios showed multiple complaints, attacked the same ethnic and religious group, and fired the employees for the same reason. CAIR-CIN is working with the 24 former employees to take action against DHL Global Mail for its discriminatory behavior.

The evidence of these instances of religious intolerance occurring so close to our own homes brings us to the two core questions we must ask ourselves: why is this intolerance against Muslims in America happening and what can we do to reduce it? Many people mistake terrorist activities to be dictates of Islam rather than the violent misinterpretations of extremist people. For instance, the Qur’an dictates life, dignity, and freedom of choice as God-given rights that all people who practice Islamic faith must willingly allow (Cornell 292). In accordance to this, the activities of any extremist terrorist group would be directly contradictory to the mandates of Islamic faith. Unfortunately, most of the general American population would not be educated about such details regarding a faith system they are already so afraid of. This fear that results from ignorance coupled with xenophobia likely causes much of the intolerance directed toward Muslims in America. It is highly probable that those two factors contribute, at least at some level, to the intolerance displayed towards the Somali Muslims at these two companies. Also, the specific decisions regarding the workers’ break times and restrictions were made by a few, select superiors implying that more personal factors could also affect the intolerance that those particular perpetrators displayed towards these employees. Unfortunately, as long as American soldiers are killed by the day in the Middle East and extremist terrorism continues to thrive in the world, the fear will never disappear. The best attempt we can make to reduce these intolerant behaviors is to try to educate as much of the general population about religions and religious intolerance. Hopefully, through continued efforts by universities and organizations focused on promoting tolerant behavior, we will gradually reduce religious intolerance around the United States and, through example, perhaps the world.

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