

Case Study

Chapter 13

Alaa, a Muslim student, tells her biology professor that she needs to be absent from class due to Eid, a religious holiday. The professor does not excuse the absence. Alaa takes her concerns to the dean who sends an email out to all faculty that religious holidays need to be respected. The professor grudgingly excuses the absence but will not meet with Alaa to discuss what she missed.

Alaa talks to other classmates and professors about this, most of whom are empathetic and supportive. Unfortunately, the biology professor is unfriendly to Alaa for the remainder of the semester. Alaa makes sure to catch up on her work and not miss anymore classes.

- 1. Is Canada more of a secular or religious country?**
- 2. Is Alaa being discriminated against by the biology professor?**
- 3. Did the dean handle the situation appropriately? Should anything else have been done?**
- 4. How might sociologists view this incident?**
- 5. What can the university do to support students who practice different religions?**

Sample Answers:

1. Canada has become more of a secular country; however, many Canadians still identify with an organized religion. We also have people in Canada practising many different religions.
2. Yes, the professor should demonstrate cultural awareness and religious sensitivity by acknowledging that students may need to miss class due to observed holidays within their traditions. After all, Christian students get Christmas and Easter off school. Alaa may interpret her treatment as discrimination, and in this case, Islamophobia.
3. The dean handled the situation well by sending out the email to faculty so that they can be consistent in responding to these requests and deciding on excused absences. The dean could have spoken to the biology professor to explain the reasoning and request that the student be treated fairly. The dean should also follow up with Alaa to ensure she was treated respectfully by the professor after reporting her concerns.
4. Sociologists would suggest that organized religion can serve to include and exclude others. Here we see how religion is served to exclude others who don't practice the mainstream religion of Christianity and its followers who have statutory holidays based on religious holidays. In a pluralistic society such as Canada, schools and workplaces need to respect all cultures and religions, including their holidays. Sociologists would suggest that Alaa wants to attend the Eid ceremonies as part of a shared identity and feeling of belonging with others within her religious community, thus promoting social solidarity.
5. The university can distribute calendars that list religious holidays for different faiths so that professors can confirm excused absences and demonstrate sensitivity to students requesting time off. The university can provide an inter-denominational resource centre and chaplain to support students of all faiths. A space for prayer and meditation can also

be provided. Celebrations for different faiths can be hosted on campus and be open to everyone in order to increase cultural awareness and respect for those practicing diverse religions.