

Culture Vs. Religion

Thursday Reflections by Dr. Hamid Slimi

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What is cultural and what is religious? Is this a religious act or just a cultural one? Why aren't we supposed to do this or that? These are some of the very common questions specifically among our youth and among our North American Muslims in general. People - youth or new Muslims- are told they are not supposed to do this or that because it is either an innovation (*bid'ah*) or against the religion but they find that there is no proof for such prohibitions in the religious texts or scholarly works so their minds are triggered to question and investigate the truth of the matter.

To elucidate this issue, we must first and foremost define what the words 'culture' and 'religion' mean then compare the two and give examples for each one of them then analyze where they might overlap between each other.

The word 'culture' means a way of life of a group whether religious or otherwise. It consists of conducts, objects, beliefs and other features and characteristics shared by the affiliates of a specific group or society. It is through culture that people and groups define themselves and conform to society's shared values. Culture includes customs, values, norms, rules, language, products, organizations and institutions such as religion, family, tribe, community...etc., The word 'religion' can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices based on the latter. In other words, this system guides and teaches the adherents what to believe, what to do or say and what to be. These three things are what the religion of Islam is all about encompassing a belief system, a body of laws and regulations and a code of behavior.

We also have to distinguish between 'Cultural Islam' and 'Islamic Culture'. The former is also referred to in academia as 'Popular Islam'. It is simply a set of beliefs or practices that have become popular in a certain Muslim region and people spread them over time through their cultural tools although they were either inherited from pre-Islamic times before the advent of Islam or were indigenous or borrowed from other cultures through what is known as syncretism as a result of interaction and cultural exchanges between people. They may also include things that contradict the very teachings of the Islamic faith such as many superstitious beliefs that are still strong among many Muslims and some practices like honor Killing, female circumcision or FGM (female genital mutilation), caste system, restricted marriage to only one race or ethnicity, favoring or tolerating males versus females, forbidding female widows from marrying and other practices that clearly contradict the principles and the spirit of Islam.

As for the Islamic culture, it is the product of Muslims around the world such as their creativity, customs and celebrations, which do not conflict with the core teachings and principles of Islam or customs encouraged by Islam. There are many

cultural practices that are acceptable because they are based on human nature (*fitrah*), common sense and many Islamic and universal concepts and values such as *Hayaa*, respect, cooperation, humanity, service, emotional expressions of happiness and celebration. All foods, drinks, customs, habits, lifestyles are acceptable so long as they do not contradict clear religious instructions and they are not religious acts of worship because as the maxim goes: "The default in Islamic rulings: Everything is permissible unless there is a clear text forbidding the act." (*al-Aslu fi-al-Ashya'l al-Ibaha ma lam yarid nass*). Permissibility in everything outside the circle of Beliefs, acts of worship and Morality, which constitute the religion as mentioned above. Some of the common cultural practices that do not contradict the religion and may even enhance some of the teachings of the religion are for instance: presenting flowers for the sick or for congratulating someone - Culinary habits and creations - Baby shower - Bridal shower - North American cultural celebrations like Thanksgiving dinner...etc.,

Creativity and innovation are encouraged and celebrated. New ideas of how to cook delicious meals, how to build better homes, how to decorate our dwellings and how to improve our lifestyles and quality of life are some of many good things that are cultural.

As for the religious matters related to the belief system, the prescribed acts of worship and ethics and morality that are part of our human nature and universal values they remain timeless and cultures cannot change them. We are instructed to follow in everything we are instructed to believe, do/say and be in order to serve and please our Creator and bring ourselves closer to Him. In addition to that, all the universal values shared by all humans and matters of *Fitrah* (human nature). If Innovation (*bid'ah*) and creativity are not allowed in the acts of worship and the timeless principles mentioned above, they are allowed and even encouraged in the means and tools that help us enhance an act of worship or a universal value or principle. For instance, communication with the masses today in a more efficient manner while using modern technology of sound, image, resolution, clarity, is definitely something that is needed and open for more innovation, creativity and enhancement. These tools help us reach and communicate better even if they were not originally used during a specific act of worship such microphones, power and modern facilities. We cannot change the way we pray, fast or do Hajj because those things were finalized (Qur'an 5:3) but the means can always improve.

How about the debate among Muslims over Mother's Day and Father's Day because for Muslims celebrating our mothers or fathers is a daily religious duty? How about Wedding Anniversaries, Birthdays, New Year Celebration? How about Celebrating Our beloved Prophet's life, his birth, his Mi'raj, his Hijrah...etc.? We will discuss these things in the next reflection insha Allah based on the points we mentioned in this reflection.