

‘To you your way, to me my way’

**SHAIKH
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ALLAH SWT states in the Holy Quran: ‘And We have made you into nations and tribes so that you get to know each other.’ (49:13)

The recent controversy regarding the ‘Rasool wedding’ has brought interesting and important discussions to the fore. The main issue of contention has been the scope of ‘cultural/ religious’ integration permitted by Islam.

The intermingling of people of different cultures and religions is a fact of life. No single cultural/ religious community can live in isolation from others. What guidelines then does Islam give us regarding our interactions with others, particularly about cultural and religious exchanges?

To begin with, it must be stated that Islam is a culture-neutral faith. Islam does not prescribe or prefer any particular culture for its followers. It is a great misconception that Islam endorses Arab culture.

While the Arabic language does play an essential role in scripture-based Islamic rituals, Arab culture itself has no sacred status in Islam. Non-Arab Muslims who imitate Arabs do it out of their will, and not due to any religious prescription; most don’t.

Non-Arabs constitute the majority of Muslims today, and the overwhelming majority of them have retained their pre-Islamic

non-Arab cultures/ languages/ traditions/ attires albeit with an Islamic flavour, which has added to its richness.

As Dr Umar Faruq Abd-Allah (USA) stated: ‘In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet and life-giving but – having no colour of their own – reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow.’

Therefore, we have today, Arab Islamic culture, African Islamic culture, Malay Islamic culture, Indian Islamic culture, Chinese Islamic culture, Turkish Islamic culture, and even American Islamic culture. Each has universal themes intermixed with local flavours and colours.

This phenomena is rooted in the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) who practically taught his Companions to appreciate different cultures.

Imam Muslim narrates that the famous Companion Abd-al-Rahman bin Awf (RA) met the Prophet (SAW) with yellow henna on his clothes. The Prophet (SAW) asked him what the henna was for? He replied that he had got married the previous day so the Prophet (SAW) congratulated him!

The point derived here was that the Prophet (SAW) did not condemn his Makkkan Companion for following the Madinan custom of putting yellow henna on the groom.

Bukhari also narrates that Sayyida Aisha (RA), the wife of the Prophet (SAW), returned home from a neighbour’s wedding.

The Prophet (SAW) asked whether there had been any singing, stating that ‘the Ansar liked song’.

Here we see the Messenger (SAW) encouraging the people to follow their customs and not to abandon them.

Bukhari also narrates that the Prophet (SAW) allowed his African companions to celebrate Eid in their own style, with singing and dancing with spears inside his mosque.

While he did not join them, he did watch their performance with his wife.

Ahadith also mention the Prophet (SAW) donning an African robe gifted to him by the Negus and a Roman robe gifted by the Caesar.

The narration of the Prophet (SAW) fasting on Ashura, with the Jews, is well-known, and this was to demonstrate the affinity we have to the prophet Moses (AS).

However, the question remains: how far can we go with cultural integration with the other?

Scholars have stated that while we can accommodate the cultural practices of others, we cannot adopt their unique religious practices, particularly those that compromise the Tawhid of Allah, and the ethics of Islam.

Islam is the final message of God to humankind. It abrogates

all that came before it. We are required to call others towards Islam and the Muhammadan Way. Imitating the ways of others contradicts this essential precept of Islam.

Thus, we find the Prophet (SAW) also warning the ummah from ‘following the ways of the Yahud, Nasara and mushrikeen’, and predicting that from the signs of the Final Hour will be that Muslims will be following the ways of non-Muslims, even entering a deadly ‘lizard-hole’ just because they did it.

The Prophet (SAW) also warned: ‘Whoever imitates a people becomes one of them.’ (Abu-Dawud)

On a practical level, the Prophet (SAW) liked to do the opposite of the disbelievers, in religious matters. When the qiblah was towards Jerusalem, in similarity to the Jews, he wished to pray toward Makkah. And thus it was changed.

When the call to prayer was being decided for his mosque, he disliked the idea of using a bell or a horn, as those were the ‘ways of the Yahud and Nasara’.

He also prohibited prayer to Allah during sunrise and sunset as the Majus and mushrikeen worshipped the sun at that time.

In another authentic hadith, he (SAW) ordered Muslim men to trim their moustaches and keep their beards to look ‘differently from the fire-worshippers (who did the opposite)’.

When the Jews would not even go near their wives during the menstrual cycle, the Prophet (SAW) told the Muslim men to go against the Jewish practice and do whatever they wished with their wives, except for intercourse.

Most Muslims know Surah al-Kafirun by heart. This surah states clearly: ‘We will not worship what you worship, like you do not worship what we worship... to you your way, to me my way.’

This surah was revealed when the disbelievers of Makkah, led by Abu-Sufyan, made a compromise offer to the Prophet (SAW) that they were willing to ‘worship Allah with him’ if he were willing to worship their gods with them. The response was Surah al-Kafirun.

In summary, we can say that while Islam permits the accommodation of all cultures into its fabric, it does restrict the Muslim from participating in or imitating the unique religious practices of other faiths. Sometimes, the lines between culture and religion may be thin and blurry, and we should not rush to make judgments.

The challenge is upon us, in a multi-cultural/ multi-religious South Africa, to integrate with the various cultures around us, without compromising our faith and our unique religious identity as Muslims.

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