

Khalifatul Masih IVth Speaks on Culture and Religion

(taken from a Question Answer session and transcribed from audiotape by Saliha Malik):

Question:

What is the difference between Culture and Religion and what should a lady do in such circumstances?

Answer:

The first part is very clear but the second part I couldn't follow unless you mean, 'What should a lady do when her culture demands different behavior and her religion demands different behavior? Is that what you wanted to ask? First please make your question clear.

When there is a clash in religious values and cultural values what should a person do? Here the question should not be limited to ladies alone. Any person be he a male or be she a lady. If he/she finds him/herself in such a different situation, then what should he/she do?

Now first of all, what is the difference between Religion and Culture? Religion is a course of conduct prescribed for man by the higher being, that is God. Now this is the definition, as we understand it being Muslim. And also the Christians and the Jews agree to this definition. In other parts of the world, in other religions, this definition has to be widened a bit. Because there is no question of one God; there may be many deities or some other concepts. Then the definition would be: any course of conduct, which is prescribed to him by saintly people, by people on earth who have contact with deities or by such people who are saintly in their behavior, but they do not establish contact with any outside deity, yet they are wise, so wise that they hold the position of dictating things to other people. And because their teachings, the course they prescribe, pertains to moral values and the subject of morality of man, so this is a religion. I am widening this definition in view of the Hindus and the Buddhists, and all the religions similar to them also are contained in this definition.

Those who believe in deities, they don't believe that those deities have definitely set a course for mankind. And they don't have definite teachings from certain deities, but the whole thing is confused. In some places you find saints speaking of deities' good will and wishes. And sometimes some saints refer to certain deities, which have spoken to them. And some just speak from themselves and say if you do this you will be saved, if you don't do this you will go to hell or this and that. So these are also religions. And Buddhism, which is an atheist Religion, yet is called religion because they believe that this course of behavior has come from a very wise source that is Buddha. The very spring of wisdom has been tapped to prescribe this conduct for man and because it pertains to morality and ultimate happiness of mankind, so this should be termed a religion. As against this, culture has no such roots, no such

contacts what so ever, which make culture binding on the people as far as morality goes.

Culture and Religion may have some common ground occasionally. Many cultural heritages, which you find today in different parts of the world, are in fact related to the religions of those respective regions. And no culture can be found completely divorced and separated from the religion of that area and those people. Yet culture is not a moral must. Culture does not deal with crime and punishment. Culture does not deal with deeds of good acts and rewards. Culture is a set value, which is a reward in itself or a punishment in itself. If you follow the cultural values of a people, they are for your attraction and for making you appear one of the people. If you adopt that mode, that way of life it has nothing to do with your moral uplift or with the Life to Come. That only relates to your closeness to a certain people or to your being apart from a certain people.

This culture can be adopted without interference to your religion or sometimes at the cost of your religion. Generally speaking, the best formula for a culture is given in this English saying that, 'When in Rome do as the Romans do.' Now this is cultural advice. A Britisher if he goes to Rome and starts doing as the Romans do, is not violating any British rules, nor any Christian rules, neither politically, nor culturally, nor in any other respect. What he is doing is, that he wants to identify himself with the sea of people around him, and that identification can be done through culture, through adopting that culture. Unless you are culturally the same, unless those barriers, which are cultural values, are removed, those people who come and settle in a country, even if they get naturalized and get the nationality of that people, they still remain aloof, they remain apart, mainly because of these cultural gaps. And most of the racial hatreds, which you find in some regions, they also spring from these cultural gaps. So culture is different and religion is different.

In culture, many a time you can adopt a culture without sacrificing your religion. But occasionally it so happens, and particularly it so happens with Islam, that most of the cultures as found in the world today do not entirely agree with Islamic values, so there has to be a separation at some place. And this is why the fundamental rule for accepting a religion is that you must give precedence to religion over every other value. This is what has been made very clear in the Holy Qur'an in so many places and also this is exactly what has been included in the conditions of Ba'ait (that is initiation) by Hadhrat Masih Maud^{as}: "***I will always give preference to Religion over the worldly affairs***". So when we define the relationship between Religion and culture, like I have done, then the second part of your question automatically drops out. Always every time when you find yourself on the cross roads, and you have to decide between culture and religion, and you cannot reconcile one with the other without damaging the other, then the only course prescribed by religion to you is follow Religion and sacrifice cultural values, and be ready to go through any punishment if the society metes punishment out to you.

Now with Purdah, observation of purdah or anything else, what ever you may want to call it, for instance it is not only the ladies who are put in trial, it is men also who

are always on trial in different cultural values. Here in England they go for dancing, drinking, clubs and things, which always invite you in the name of culture towards things, which are declared evil in the Holy Qur'an, - gambling. And when you don't mix up with them in all these departments, then you become aloof, even if you are a British national. You are no longer British, because of the cultural differences. So you have to accept it and accept it in a manner that through propagation, you win over that society and assimilate it into Islamic culture. So when I said Islamic culture a new factor has got introduced into our discussion. Previously we were only speaking of religion and culture as two different things, as different spheres occasionally meeting in certain spheres. But now when I speak of Islamic culture what I mean to say is this; that Islam has spoken so much of every day life that no other religion has spoken so much. And looking at it from this angle you may declare it to be a very demanding religion, so demanding that it turns life into a sort of imprisonment. Now this is not sarcasm, this is in reality what it is. This is exactly what Hadhrat Mohammad Mustafar^{saw} has declared it to be when he says:

"This world is a prison for believers and a heaven for the non-believers"

So that heaven lies in their different cultural values, and this imprisonment is the imprisonment of Shariah. So inside the prison there is also a sort of culture, and outside the prison there is also a sort of culture.

Now what are the fundamental differences between Islamic culture and non-Islamic culture? The fundamental differences, of course there are so many differences, but I am only going to make it clear to you that despite the fact that Islam is a religion, it also so has a sort of culture. And in fact every culture earlier mentioned is colored by some religion, though it gets divorced in the process of time and acquires an independent identity. But looking back again at the question of cultures, if you begin to study it from this angle you will immediately recognize the effect of religion on cultures. Now here, for instance, in the western society, the Jewish are as much western as any other people are, the Jewish people, yet there is a marked difference between the culture of the Jews and the culture of the Christians. Indian culture is a so-called Indian culture but it is not just one culture. The Muslim way of life there was different and the Hindu way of life there was different. And the Buddhist way of life was different from the Hindu way of life. These three peoples, as far as nationality went, were Indians, yet their cultures were different. And again the Hindu culture was not just one single culture.

Culture is a very delicate mixing of certain religious values with certain local values. And that blending produces a culture, which comes into its own and results in an independent way of life. So Hinduism wherever it went to; in the south it acquired a different culture when it went to the north of India it acquired a different culture and so on in the east and west it acquired different cultures, yet all had the same Hindu features in those cultures. This is exactly what has happened in the case of Islam. When we speak of Islamic culture, it is a very misleading word if you don't apply it to various regions where Muslims are found and then further analyze the situation, otherwise you will remain completely confused. When we speak of Islamic

culture, that is different in Indonesia from that found in Arabia and very different in India and Pakistan than from Israel, and different from south of India and north of India and east of India and west of India. Bengali culture, for instance, I have been there many a time while Bangladesh had not yet come into being, it was East Pakistan in those days. Now we have a Muslim culture in West Pakistan and they also had a Muslim culture in East Pakistan, as it was called then, but the values were so different that a Bengali felt a Hindu closer to them in cultural values than a West Pakistani, a Punjabi, for instance. So yet there was difference between a Hindu Bengali culture and a Muslim Bengali culture too. There were certain features. What are those features, which may make a culture appear religious in certain aspects and where you can find a common thread of religion? Those are the features, which in a religion have *no compromise* with other values. They are religious rights, which cannot be compromised. And those rights when they enter a culture got mixed with culture; they give that clear coloring of the religion to that culture. Hindus have their rights of worship and other religious obligations and things, which they always maintain, whether they are in Bengal or in Gujarat or in North India or wherever they are. So these are the values, which will not be compromised. Those uncompromising values form the basic structure of a culture, which has many other values and wherever there is a mixture these two fissures have to be taken in to account separately.

So Islam has some values of no compromise. Those values are for instance its demand on human beings in the direction of God and in the direction of mankind. Demands that are imperative, which you can never afford to leave or ignore, for instance five times worship, for instance being pure, not hygienically, but as we call it being *pak (pure)* or not *pak*; it has nothing to do with hygiene, it is something of a religious value added to your purity and your cleanliness. To have a bath in certain situations, and to wash your mouth and take full ablutions before you go to the prayers. And whenever you attend the call of nature you must wash yourself as prescribed with water, not with just any cloth or anything. So all these are religious dos or don'ts, which must be observed meticulously by the Muslims. So whenever these features and many other such features, which are made obligatory in every Muslim's life and which he comes across almost daily, it becomes a routine of his life, they will always be found intermixed with Muslim cultures what ever those cultures may be.

The segregation of sexes is a fundamental part of Muslim culture. It has no compromise. How you observe it, there might be some cushioning, some difference of opinion, some slight compromises, but segregation in itself is a fundamental order. And this segregation order can never be accepted by the present day western culture. Even if you don't observe purdah with a burqa as it is observed in Pakistan, its segregation you will have to follow. And at every step you will find difficulties as you are presenting just only in the form of purdah. A man will extend his hand for you to shake hands, he would like you to join him for a cup of wine or something, or he will invite you to the dancing floor, and many another situation will arise. How can you cooperate with them for the sake of a culture, for the sake of not offending

such people, if you have to sacrifice your religion? So it is not just purdah to be taken aloof as a single value. Even if you give in here, how can you give in at every step? If you give in at every step then nothing would be left of you that is of Islam. Only the western acquired culture would be the net result. These small things, I mean if you call it a small thing, appear to be small in their own limited sphere, but in totality they play a very important role. To make what I want to say more clear, I can illustrate it with a joke. It is a joke, but it is ideally applicable in this situation.

Somebody went for tattoo. He asked the person who was the expert to make a lion's picture by tattooing on his arm. So when he pricked him with the needle he felt pain. He said, 'What are you doing?' The man replied, 'Well you asked me to make a lion, I am doing that'. He said, 'But what are you making now at this moment?' The man replied, 'I am starting with the eye'. He said, 'Can't a lion be complete without an eye?' The man replied, 'Yes of course, he would remain a lion without an eye.' He said, 'Alright, don't make the eye, make something else.' So the man pricked him again and he said, 'What are you doing this time?' The man replied 'This is the left eye now, previously it was the right eye' He said, 'Can't there be blind lions?' the man replied, 'Yes, of course there are blind lions'. He said, 'Make a blind lion this time.' So he went to prick again, and this time it was the right ear and he said, 'Of course lions can be without ears'. And then came the turn of legs and of the parts of the body. And each single part was declared not to be essential by the one who was tattooing. And he said, 'Yes, you can do without it, a lion can be without it'. So he got up without a lion.

So if you begin to behave this way to a religion by declaring a small point, a small point without which a religion can be complete. It would not only be a small point, it would be a train, a procession of small points, which would ultimately take away the entire values of religion, and what you would be left with would be just simple culture.