

12/12/2001

Happily trapped in the past

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ISLAM, as practised in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand and pockets of other parts of South-East Asia, is a million miles away from the faith of the defeated Taliban.

In countries where Muslims are minorities, many women justify wearing the tudung (headscarf) and men the robes (jubah) either as a public statement of their own spiritual quest or of their political identity in a world where Islam perceives itself as under threat, or both.

The fourth pillar of Islam (there are five altogether) is Puasa (fasting) between dawn and dusk. It is mandatory for all adult Muslims in good health to abstain from food, drink, smoking and sex.

Vices like lying and back-biting are regarded as particularly detestable during Ramadan which is also a good time for charity - visiting the sick, the aged and the poor. Puasa lasts for an entire lunar month of between 28 and 30 days, and ends with the most popular of Islam's festivals, Hari Raya Puasa or Eid-al-Fitri. This year, we may only be fasting for 29 days.

I shall write a bit about what a traditional Malay family does during Ramadan. The day begins when everyone gets up for Suboh prayers (dawn prayers) after having had Sahur (supper to prepare for fasting).

After prayers, in my case, I normally read or write. Between 9am and 10am, depending on the appointments, at times as early as seven, I leave for the office, and work until I leave either for home or a breaking fast engagement. I pray together with my family, and sometimes I go for terawih prayers (important sunnah prayers) at a nearby mosque or wherever I fancy.

There is no obligation for me or Muslims to perform this. However, most people do. It's about choice really. I like to go to the mosque (during Puasa on Fridays) because I feel good, cleansed, energised and there's the wonderful feeling of fellowship.

Islam is a very flexible religion, made difficult by the likes of the Taliban and holier-than-thou types. Few people know that Muslims can defer prayers (qada) until later if it is unavoidable. Most people, however, feel restless if they do not pray on time. Praying is such a part of my daily routine.

I go to bed late, more so during Ramadan. I say my prayers before sleep simply because I may not wake up the next morning! They say the best thing is to die in your sleep.

Hari Raya Puasa may fall on Sunday. The first thing a Muslim family does is to have a special Hari Raya bath and a light breakfast - its first after 29 or 30 days of fasting.

The men folk (although some women do too) go to the mosque for the Hari Raya prayers. Many, after the mosque, visit the graves of their loved ones to put flowers, sprinkle scented water and recite prayers.

They then rush home to celebrate with members of the family. The children and grandchildren ask for forgiveness from parents, grand-parents and older siblings, and duit raya (pocket money) is given out, the amount generally depending on the chronological age.

The traditional open house begins after that, when close relatives and neighbours come calling to exchange greetings and to ask for forgiveness for the sins they might have committed against one another.

The traditional open house has now been replaced by another type where formal invitations are issued to include friends as well as business or political associates and even recent acquaintances. Everything is now

planned. Nothing wrong, of course, except that it no longer has spontaneity.

At Christmas, unlike Hari Raya, many find festive cheer in holly, tinsel and lights. The Yuletide spirit is strictly for immediate members of the family. The sheer predictability of the Christmas lunch is part of the celebration. Ramadan, Hari Raya and Yuletide are a time of universal goodwill and good cheer.

During these times, believers of their faith should cultivate empathy towards the less fortunate brethren and foster harmony, brotherhood and unity. Christians believe in Original sin, understood as a fault so deep in the human soul that only God himself, by suffering on our behalf, can atone for it. Therefore, Christ's atonement, in classical Christian doctrine, becomes effective for ordinary believers when mediated to them in sacraments such as baptism and communion.

Islam, on the converse, like Judaism, holds that humanity is in essence good, and needs only guidance from various Prophets to nudge it to God's presence. Prophet Muhammad was to Muslims the last of all God's Prophets.

The relationship between Islam and Christianity is close; both trace their pedigree back to Nabi Ibrahim (Abraham). Relations have more often been friendly than otherwise. However, when they feel threatened by the other, they fight!

Hari Raya, Christmas, Chinese New Year and Deepavali are joyous time for all. Over the years, I have never experienced fatigue entertaining. Who knows how many tens of thousands Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali will welcome to their home this year. They have been doing this effortlessly for 20 years.

Hari Raya, being the caring and sharing festival it is, welcomes all to join in, for everybody to have a good time. For sure, it is not a hallowed tradition. Muslim adults, unlike Christians, do not exchange gifts on Hari Raya. The excitement first thing in the morning is the breakfast, whereas in the case of Christians, it is the morning of opening presents.

Anyone who wants to understand Islam must learn this crucial point: Separate Islam, the religion, from the cultural norms and style of a society. Culture, not Islam, is to blame for the negative image of Islam. Islamophobia is widespread in the West as we wrestle with tensions between tradition and modernity, between Islam and political Islam.

One must distinguish between cultural primitiveness and Islam. There are many things being done in the name of Islam which are incompatible with the religion.

The increase in Islamophobia that followed the events of September 11 has been fuelled by many wrong assumptions, fed by forces which do not want to see goodwill exist between the two great religions.

Throughout Ramadan, prayers and sermons in the Muslim world evoke the language of divine truth - for this is the only weapon the Muslims have - against the West-sanctioned corruption and decadence of princes in West Asia which lies at the root of the general Muslim position against the US.

On Christmas and Hari Raya, we eat special food, and good fellowship prevails. Both celebrations have become increasingly commercialised.

"Harry Potter", the remarkably successful series of books by J.K. Rowling, has resulted in a deluge of merchandise into the toy markets.

Harry Potter action figures and spelling books are good presents to spoil children with, besides the regular run of Christmas goodies. My grandchildren are too small for spelling books. Perhaps, I should buy them H.P. pyjamas and toys to temper their tantrums!

Come to think of it, I have become like some Englishmen who never quite leave Oxbridge. Well, some never even leave their prep schools! The experiences at these places can be so intense and over-powering that men

are left emotionally trapped forever after. And how much more when it comes to either Hari Raya or Christmas. I am trapped in my past; happily too.

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