

CAN A MUSLIM WISH A CHRISTIAN 'MERRY CHRISTMAS(2)?'"*

(Khutbah delivered at Monash University, Friday Prayer 11-12-09.)

Bros. in Islam: May Allah (swt) be pleased with us on this auspicious day, and forgive us all our sins.

Soon Christmas will arrive.

Muslims like to encourage non Muslims to respect our fasting, when we refrain or abstain from eating and drinking during the day.

So when non-Muslims, such as Christians, celebrate Christmas, which to many Christians still has a religious significance to it, are we Muslims allowed to wish them a "Merry Christmas" as a respect for them?

This question, this dilemma or even quandary has been with us since a long time. Some scholars determine that it is not permissible to wish Christians "Merry Christmas", while some others opine otherwise.

Let me refresh your memory of what Christmas really is.

Many Christians, including educated ones, still believe that Christmas is their God's - Jesus's - birthday, while many others, such as the Anglican Bishop, Professor Tom Frame, says (quote) "Christianity's holy days - such as Christmas - have become secular holidays while Sundays are little different from the rest of the working week." Unquote.

And here is a piece from the Islamicity Website, a much respected source of news about Islam and Muslims, particularly in America: quote:

Christmas is an annual Christian religious holiday commemorating the birth of Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him. For many Muslims who do not even celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, it becomes an issue of what stand they should take.

There have been a number of legitimate criticisms of the holiday from Muslims and non-Muslims based on theological and cultural considerations.

However, this cannot be used to disregard the holiday as merely an exercise in ancient pagan practices, for instance, or excessive consumerism. Muslims have to remember that for practicing Christians, Christmas really is about Jesus .

Prophet Muhammad , was so accommodating of Christians that according to the two earliest Islamic historians, Ibn e Saad and Ibn Hisham, the Prophet even allowed a delegation of 60 Byzantine Christians from Najran in Yemen to worship in his own

mosque in Madinah. Lead by their bishop (Usquf), they had come to discuss a number of issues with him. When time of their prayer came, they asked the Prophet's permission to perform this in the mosque. He answered, "conduct your service here in the mosque. It is a place consecrated to God." Unquote.

Historically no one has been able to determined as a fact the actual date of the birth of Jesus - unlike the Prophet Muhammad (saw), for example, who was born on the 12th of Rab'ulawal in the year of the Elephant, or 20th April 571 of the Miladiah, in Mecca.

Until now it is still debated where exactly was Jesus born - Baitullaham - Bethlehem - or Nazareth.

Astronomically, it is more probable that Jesus was born between the 13th and 27th of April.

But why has Christmas been celebrated on December 25th?

There was no Christmas until the year 274 in the Christian Era. At that time, the then Roman Emperor, Aurelian, decided that it was not only wrong, but sinful to continue celebrating the pagan winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere which falls around now or a day later - 21st or 22nd December. And the 25th of December was believed by the pagans of Europe as the birthday of the Sun God, Sol Invictus, whose power would be restored after having been eclipsed by the winter cold. And the sun was considered to be provider of life and warmth.

Before Christianity arrived in Europe, the pagans used to celebrate the solstice, because it was the longest night, and henceforth the night would become shorter while daylight would increasingly become longer, culminating in mid-summer, July. So what did the pagans use to do during the dark, cold nights of winter, when there was no heating, no electricity, while firewood had to be conserved for other more important utilisations? To cheer up every one, a tradition of gift exchange was also established.

But the Roman Emperor Aurelian thought it would be such a waste to abolish the winter solstice celebrations, paganistic though it was. However, Christmas was not formally established by the then Orthodox and Catholic Churches - the Protestant Churches had until then not been established yet - until the year 335 in the Christian Era.

In the English Oxford Dictionary, the first mention of Christmas was in its 1123 edition.

When the Puritans were in power in England under Oliver Cromwell, in 1642, Christmas was proscribed, forbidden, because it was considered as a heresy - bid'ah. Likewise in America, Christmas was only celebrated after 1856.

There is again another theory why December 25th was - and to many Christians is still - considered the birthday of Jesus.

In the Roman calendar, known as Hippolytus, Tertullian and Philocalian, the date of Jesus's crucifixion, was set on 25th March, the Spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, equal length of day and night times - and since Jesus was considered to be a "perfect" human - insan kaamil - he was believed to have been conceived by his mother on that date, and exactly 9 months later, 25th of December he was born. This of course is human fabrication, mainly European humans.

Of course, there are Christians, like the Orthodox, who celebrate Christmas on January 6th, called the epiphany - the Baptism of Jesus. That's the long and short of the history or story of Christmas.

Like what I quoted earlier from the Anglican Bishop, Prof. Frame, "Christianity's holy days, such as Christmas, have become secular holidays."

Many cynical Australians have gone even further and say that if there was no Christmas, Myer's department store would surely have invented it, for Christmas has been synonymous with shopping galore.

That is, as they say, their business.

Now, what about us Muslims? I have no opinion about this, I will leave it to you to make your own decisions, for I am not sufficiently instructed in such matters. I can only offer you considerations as I see them in the teachings of Islam.

Many Muslims in the Middle East, particularly The Lebanon, for example, rationalise that since "We celebrate the Prophet's Muhammad (saw) birthday on 12th Rabi'ulawal, why can't we also celebrate the Prophet's 'Isa ibn Maryam's (as), birthday, even if the date is not exactly clear? We do not accept Jesus or 'Isa (as) as the son of God, or as God, but we revere Him as a great Prophet.

Our great and incomparable religion - Islam - enjoins us to be courteous and indeed, loving, to those who do not harbour any ill intent on us: **"*assAllahu an yaj'ala bainakum wa bainallazti 'aadaitum minhum mawaddah*"** it may well be - but that Allah will bring mutual affection between you (O believers) and some of those whom you (now) face as enemies (and then) Allah is all-powerful.

Then: **"*Laa yanhaa kumullahu 'anillaztina lam yuqaatilukum fiddin; wa lam yukhrijuukum min diyaarikum; an tabarruhum; watuqshitduu ilaihim.*"** - As for such (of the unbelievers) as do not fight against you on account of (your) faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, Allah does not forbid you to show them kindness, and to behave towards them with full equity, justly"

I am aware that many Muslims are fearful that wishing a Christian "Merry Christmas" might impinge upon their faith, their iman, their aqidah. Or it might undermine their faith and nudge them to "shirk" - the greatest sin in Islam.

Islam requires us to be confident of the truthfulness of our Din, our religion. We should have no doubt about it and not feel threatened easily: Al-Imran [3:139]:

Walaḥ tahinoo walaḥ taḥzanoo waantumū alaAlawna in kuntum mumineena

3:139 So lose not heart, nor fall into despair: For ye must gain mastery if ye are true in Faith.

In Surat Maryam (Chapter 19) verse 33: The Prophet 'Isa (as) himself says:

****Wassalaamu 'alaiya yaoma wulidtu
Wayaoma amutu, wa yaoma ab'astoo haya(n).****

In the meaning:

*"Hence peace was upon me on the day when I was born;
And (will be upon me) on the day of my death;
And on the day when I shall be raised to life (again)."*

Who then is affording that "peace", that salam? Surely Allah swt.

And the word "wassalamu" in this context, according to some scholars mean "peaceful greeting, in the mould of the Islamic greeting "assalamualaikum".

So when Christians, rightly or wrongly, determine that the 25th of December is the birthday of Jesus or 'Isa (as), should we wish them "Merry Christmas"? as a gesture of friendship, kindness, tolerance, that we should show the non believers as the verses from Al-Mumtahanah, say?

Or as one hadith relates about the Prophet Mohammad (saw) suggesting to his guest, a Christian priest, to perform his prayer in the mosque where they were having a discussion.

The Prophet Muhammad (saw) says that all actions shall be determined by their intentions - ***Inna mal a'malu binniah***. Of course performing a haram with a niyah hassanah, good intention, is unacceptable. Like gambling with the intention that your win will be donated to the mosque. This is unacceptable in Islam. But greeting an ahlul kitaab when he is celebrating what he considers is the birthday of his deity, does not mean we also believe in the concept of his belief. Or does it? Wallahu a'lam.

The second Caliph, Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra) in a speech at ***Jabiah*** after completing a visit to Yarusalem or Al Quds and Syria, said:

"Let your intentions be good, for verily, Allah is aware of your intentions. In your deeds your intentions count. Fear Allah and fear no one else." Unquote

In the Jabiah speech, Khalifah Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra) also reminded his retinue that *"The Qur'an is not theoretical but a practical code of life. The Qur'an does not bring the message of the hereafter only; it is primarily intended to guide you in this life."* Unquote.

As such we as Muslims must really *not only believe* in our heart but display this belief *in our actions*. Or as The Caliph Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra) said at Jabiah - *"Islam is not only theoretical but also practical."*

Believe that Islam is addiinil haq - the only true religion, and confident enough to really and wholeheartedly accept that if Allah (swt) so desires, surely He will Islamise the entire humanity - ***"Walaupun sha'a rabbuka la aa mana Man fil ardh kulluhom jamii'an."***

(Had thy Sustainer - Allah - so willed, all those who live on earth would surely have attained to faith).

Caliph Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra), at Jabiah said: *"Do not seek favours from others, but only from Allah, for you will only get what Allah has ordained for you."* Unquote.

Yet He has created us as diverse creatures - so that we may be interested in knowing each other: Al-Hujurat [49:13]

Ya ayyuha alnnasu inna khalaqnakum min thakarim waontha wajaAalnakum shuAAooban waqabaila litaAAarafoo inna akramakum AAinda Allahi atqakum inna Allaha AAaleemun khabeerun

49:13 O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Islam does not ask us to be blinkered, like the ostrich, burying our head in the sand, and thus becoming narrow minded and full of fear of losing our faith. Only we can make us lose our faith. We have nothing to fear and be afraid of. As the US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said: *The thing to fear is fear itself.* And as Caliph Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra) said: ***"Fear ONLY Allah."***

The Second Caliph and Sahabah and Father-in-Law of the Prophet: Umar Ibnu Khatab (ra), was once asked by a priest to perform the salat in the church that he was visiting when he was in Yarusalem or Al Quds. Sayyidina Umar politely declined. Not because it was against Islam, but because of consideration for the Christians. He excused himself by reminding the Church elders, that if his Ummah saw him perform the salah in the Church, then they might want to emulate him, follow suite, and at every prayer time they might congregate in the Church to perform the salah, and thus deny the Christians space for their own prayers. What considerateness. What generosity.

Hence Bros. in Islam:

With regard to the halal-or-haram of wishing our Christian friends or acquaintances or co-workers, colleagues, students, teachers, lecturers, professors, neighbours and so on and so forth "Merry Christmas", perhaps we would be well advised to reflect on what Caliph Umar Ibnu Khattab (ra) said: *"Speak the truth. Do not hesitate to say what you consider to be the truth. Say what you feel. Let your conscience be your guide. Let your intentions be good, for verily Allah (swt) is aware of your intentions. In your deeds your intentions count. **Fear Allah and fear no one else**".*

Remember the hadits which is considered as a great sign of tolerance of Islam:

"When the bier of anyone passes by you, whether Jew, Christian or Muslim, rise to your feet."

As a mark of respect. Since we are urged to respect a diseased ahlul-kitab, are we then allowed to also respect the living ones?

And the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to fast on the 10th of Muharram (Shaum Asyura), among other things, as a token of gratitude at the deliverance of the Prophet Musa (peace be upon him) and his followers from Fir'aun.

We should never ridicule the religious beliefs of others, no matter how much we disagree with them. Allah says in the Quran: *"And insult not those whom they worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge. Thus We have made fair-seeming to each people its own doings; then to their Lord is their return and He shall then inform them of all that they used to do".* [Quran, 6:108](#)

Once again let me remind you that this is not an edict or fatwa - I am unqualified to issue one - but just as food for thought.

Wallahu a'lam.#