

## Raising a Muslim child in the West – Part 1

Someone sent me a post from the granddaughter of Shaikh Ali Al-Tantawi of Al-Azhar, which I quote: *“9 years ago I was tasked with investigating the Ramadan family from Beirut who had migrated to North and South America about 100 years ago. I found 5000 members of the family. 96% of them were not Muslim any longer.”* I am still trying to grapple with this given that these were Arabs, who spoke Arabic and presumably could understand the Qur’an and the Ahadith of Rasoolullah ﷺ without needing any translations. Contrast this with the history of Indians in South Africa which starts with the arrival of indentured labor from Madras and Calcutta in 1860 to replace African slave labor and you will see that in 150 years, there are perhaps not even 10 incidents of Muslims among them leaving Islam. Remember that South Africa in 1860 was a British colony which later became an Afrikaner Republic, both devoutly Christian. Anglican and then Dutch Reformed Church. Yet there were practically no conversions. The ‘secret’ was the establishment of Masaajid and Madaaris which happened almost from the moment they landed in South Africa. Vibrant Masaajid and Madaaris are the heart of our Deen and the best protection against Riddah (apostasy).

Muslims struggle and agonize over the biggest challenge of all – raising children who are practicing Muslims, in the ‘West’. This challenge is the result of Muslims moving to the ‘West’ in search of economic prosperity or to escape persecution in their native lands. The ‘West’ comes with many benefits, the biggest of which is human dignity. Add to that free enterprise, a vibrant economy, dignity of labor and compensation that

enables one to support his family, 'back home', wherever that may be; and you have a very attractive proposition. Immigrants work hard, long hours, for lower wages which are still higher than what they would have been able to earn back home and save. That enables them to access high class education, excellent medical care, and the standard of living that they had dreamt of. But along with all this comes 'Western' culture, values, morals, aspirations, and the ever present 'danger' as most Muslims see it, of assimilation resulting in the loss of our Islamic identity. The question that most parents grapple with is how they can have the best of both worlds, i.e., New World standard of living with Old World values. Is this even doable? And if so, what does it take?

Short answer: Yes, it is doable. And it will take a lot of parenting by you.

First, we must define the meaning of 'The West'. The term, 'The West' (Urdu: Maghrib) is used both to pinpoint a location as well as to define a state of mind, an ideology, a philosophy, and a way of life (Urdu: Maghribiyat). The 'West' as a location, is incidental. But 'Western' as an ideology, is powerful, potentially all pervasive, social engineering, statement of values and a definer of actions leading to a new purpose for this life and existence. One is outside you and you live in it. The other is inside you and directs your decisions, desires, and actions. It is essential to keep these two definitions in mind when we talk about 'The West and Islam'. To avoid confusion in this lecture, I am going to call the ideology, 'Westernism'. Like Islam, 'Westernism' is an ideology which is not location specific but is global. As evidence I ask you, what do you call

Australia and New Zealand; Western or Eastern? Ask yourself why? So 'Westernism' is not only about culture but also about race and stated and unstated ideas of racial supremacy.

The secret is the globalization of thought. Technology has facilitated the global spread of this dominant culture and the internalizing of its values where people far removed physically from the West, see themselves in terms that are Western. They appreciate, like, look up to or down on each other based on their admiration of Western values and norms, even though these may be far removed from their own cultures. You can see the effect of this on people's clothing, the spread of English as the lingua franca of the world, hair styles, foods, drinks (sodas), smileys, emojis, abbreviations (lol, rofl). I can go on but won't. The same holds for all the symbols of culture. There are still countries where local cultures enforce some level of decorum and bar promiscuity, but all barriers fall in the face of technology. Thanks to the internet, smart phones, Instagram, Netflix, Facebook, and WhatsApp there is no image, no news which can be hidden from the eyes of children if they want to see it. The only guard is the conscience. Nothing else will work. Least of all, force.

Today 'Westernism' is the most common, pervasive, and widespread ideology in the whole world. 'Westernism' is as much a 'religion' as is Islam, Christianity, or any other traditional religion. It has rules of engagement, conditions of entry and exit, reward and punishment, high priests, temples, and evangelists. The fact that these titles are not used to name them is a part of the ideology of 'Westernism'. But that doesn't

change either the nature or the effect of these symbols and pillars of this new religion. They are powerful, and they are effective. 'Westernism' is effective because it panders to every desire, base or sublime, under the illusion of anonymity to make money for the suppliers. It uses desire itself with the force of 'law'. It opens doors and challenges anyone to shut them once they have been opened. And like lemmings over the cliff, humanity eats, drinks, drugs, and shops its way into oblivion.

I know I am painting a dismal, depressing picture. So, let me color in the other parts. Westernism's single differentiator is its support for freedom of belief and expression. In Western societies you are free to believe anything or say or do anything. I recall that in 1997/8 when I used to live here and we used to go to UMass every other week to meet Muslim students, the MSA room where we met them had a room labeled 'Friends of Marijuana Society' on one side and 'Devil Worshippers' on the other. Remember that this was long before recreational use of marijuana was legalized. Westernism also opens the door to questioning everything, expressing yourself in ways that you couldn't have imagined, debating, and creating new theories, to be tested, discarded, and replaced in their turn. An endless churn, constantly changing color. It is the opportunity to research, publish findings, invent, and convert the inventions into money making machines. It is the opportunity to enter any aspect of life and contribute with competence being the only entry barrier. I know that neither of the pictures I painted is entirely accurate or complete. But that

is the nature of all generalizations. But they contain enough truth to make us sit up and take notice and ask, "What must I do?"

If I were to draw a comparison, Islam and to a large extent many Eastern and African faiths and traditions are like a fixed lunch menu, while Westernism is like a multicuisine buffet with all kinds of food very attractively displayed. In the former, your choice is whether you want to eat or not and if you want to leave out anything. To eat nothing or to eat less is your choice. While in the buffet of Westernism, you need to choose what you want to eat with choice being unlimited, so to speak. Though what people often forget is that with every choice comes a price tag. That is why to live positively and productively in Western societies and to be able to contribute significantly, it is very essential to be clear about your criteria of decision making. Since there are effectively no boundaries enforced by society, you need to be able to draw your own boundaries and define your own limits. Personal likes and dislikes, pleasure and enjoyment, and subjective happiness, which are all used as the criteria for decision making are highly unsuitable and, in many cases, extremely harmful in the long term. When we choose instant gratification over long term benefit, it is always harmful. That is what makes Islam, such an invaluable asset, because we have been blessed with a framework to choose, that is clear, natural, positive, and beneficial not only for us but for all those we live with in society at large. Islam's view of making choices based on their effect on our everlasting future, the Aakhira, is the most reliable way to ensure that we choose the best for both worlds.

'Westernism' is a philosophy which is based on the supremacy of the self (desire) over everything else, including family, friends, society, and God. Its symbol is the raising of self-indulgence to the level of not only a virtue but of the very purpose of life, definition of happiness and fulfilment i.e., for one to be able to do whatever one likes, irrespective of its consequences to anyone else. Freedom is sought to be interpreted as freedom from responsibility, accountability, and consequences of one's actions. Just look at the many conflicts that have taken place on one such 'freedom' alone, 'Freedom of Expression', and you know what I mean. The best answer to that was given by Pope Francis who, mentioning the tendency to say whatever one wants in the guise of Freedom of Expression said, "If my secretary were to curse my mother, I would punch him in the face." What he meant was that there is no freedom without responsibility for what happens when you exercise that freedom. Please note that the Pope is a Westerner, living in the West. Yet his thinking is not 'Western' in terms of what I described as 'Westernism'.

Islam also is not 'Eastern' but universal; like 'Westernism'. Islam is like the principles of flight which don't change whether you are flying a plane in the US or Australia or India. Islam doesn't change for the West or East or anyone or any place. It is universal, applicable in the same way everywhere and holds its adherents to the same rules no matter where they live, in whichever century and in whatever circumstances. Islam is Islam and it is based on the principle of the supremacy of Allahﷻ over the self or anyone or anything else, accountability to Him from Whom

nothing is hidden and the subjugation of the self (desire) to the rules of Islam. Its symbol is the Sajda which is to recognize that obedience to Allahﷻ takes precedence over self-indulgence and the purpose of life and fulfilment is to live and work only for the Pleasure of Allahﷻ.

Islam allows everything pure and beneficial and prohibits the opposite.

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ  
فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ  
لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ  
الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ فَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِهِ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ  
الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

*A'araf 7: 157* Those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write (Muhammad SAW) whom they find written with them in the Taurat (Torah) (Deut, xviii, 15) and the Injeel (Gospel) (John xiv, 16), - he commands them to Al-Ma'ruf (what Islam has ordained); and forbids them from Al-Munkar (what Islam has forbidden); he allows them as lawful At-Taiyibat (all good and lawful), and prohibits them as unlawful Al-Khaba'ith (all evil and unlawful), he releases them from their heavy burdens (of Allah's Covenant), and from the fetters (bindings) that were upon them. So those who believe in him (Muhammad SAW), honor him, help him, and follow the light (Qur'an) which has been sent down with him, it is they who will be successful.

And Allahﷻ warned us against the deception of Shaytaan and said:

أَعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَهُوَ وَزِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ  
فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ الْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ  
فَتَرَاهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَمًا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ  
مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانٌ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

**Hadid 57: 20** Know that the life of this world is only play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children, as the likeness of vegetation after rain, thereof the growth is pleasing to the tiller; afterwards it dries up and you see it turning yellow; then it becomes straw. But in the Hereafter (there is) a severe torment (for those who disobey), and (there is) Forgiveness from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure (for those who obey), whereas the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment.

There is no compromise in Islam about this fundamental philosophy of the Supremacy of Allahﷻ over the Nafs (self, desire) and everything and everyone else. For those who choose to follow their desires against the orders of Allahﷻ He said:

أَرَأَيْتَ مَنِ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ أَفَأَنْتَ تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلاً

**Furqan 25: 43.** Have you (O Muhammadﷺ) seen him who has taken as his Elah (god) his own desire? Would you then be a Wakil (a disposer of his affairs or a watcher) over him?

Allahﷻ called following your own desires against the orders of Allahﷻ Shirk and tantamount to worshiping desires instead of worshiping Allahﷻ and even prohibited Rasoolullahﷺ from interceding for the forgiveness of such people. What can be clearer or more serious than that, to understand the fundamental difference between Islam and 'Westernism'?