

■ *By: Wais Popal*

# The Dilemma of Afghan Youth in Canada

**W**hat does it mean to be an Afghan-Canadian? Or is there such thing in the first place? Is it just yoking two completely different words together forcibly like an arranged marriage, or is there a real love affair between the two? I have to say, it at least sounds better than Afghan-Australian, or Afghan-French. In Los Angeles, I have even heard of Afghan-Californian so I asked my cousin if there were Afghan-Hawaiian, he had not heard of any.

The invasion of the soviet army and subsequent wars has changed the Afghan people in ways that was inconceivable before. Millions of Afghans were forced out of their homes into the refugee camps of foreign countries. Later, many of these refugees have ended up living in western Europe and North America. While the Afghan refugees in neighboring countries struggle with basic

needs such as food and shelter, the ones in the west like Canada have faced a different challenge, an unexpected one.

The challenge of adjusting to a new home, and of being part of non-Afghan and non Islamic society. This fact has created an awkward situation within our community. Our youth are placed in an ugly situation where on one hand, they have to uphold their parent's unprogres-

sive and, most often then not, impractical cultural values, and on the other hand they have to thrive and compete in their new country in economic and educational spheres. Furthermore, this awkward position is worsened by not having a specific identity.

We are Afghan-Canadians, but what does that mean? an ironic term just as confusing as everything else. Our youth need an identity that can properly describe them in this ocean that is the west. The only constant and unchanging identity that I feel is proper, practical and worthy of upholding is that of Islam. But the question arises whether the religion that our parents hold is also part and parcel of what the Afghan tradition is? Is the idea of adhering to a religion even reasonable? What is the truth behind accusations against Islam? All these questions further contribute to our dilemma and the sense of alienation from both the cultures. What is the solution to this dilemma?

The secular west respects all religions and considers them "equally good" which sounds as "equally worthless" to the rational person. Not stopping there, they consider religions as part of cultures. Therefore, religions seem to be portrayed as very limited to a specific group of people. While this may be true of some religions, it is not essentially true

to many missionary religions that claim a universal message.

Here in Canada we pride ourselves for living in a multicultural society and understand that cultures are beautiful and colorful ways of life. This understanding coerces us to accept our culture and traditions but also limit them only to our family gatherings and other community events. Imagine living in Canada and also upholding Afghan culture and traditions as one would if one lived in Afghanistan. This is preposterous even to imagine.

Cultures evolve through time and the ones that do not evolve are most certainly the ones that are fast disappearing. Could this also be true about religions? The religion that evolves is the opposite of what is true of a culture. This is merely because a true religion is from God, who is immutable; therefore, what is from God must be universal truth. Universal truth never changes. What changes are the times and situations and thus Islam has a mechanism that deals with changing times i.e. Ijtihad (Personal Scholarly Opinion) or Ijma' (the consensus of Mujtahideen or ones who do Ijtihad) which are done in the light of other rules of Islamic doctrines and dogmas called Qiyyas. This science is as old as Islam and has been done throughout Islamic history.

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One of the major reasons of indifference of the Afghan youth to Islam is that of the understanding of it as one other religion that has followers in the world. Although this may sound quite normal, it is one of the major misunderstandings of Islam as it belittles Islam's true and intended meaning.

To be a Muslim is to be in a state of submission to one true God like every other thing that is in nature. The sun always shines, the rain falls, the earth rotates around its axis, and the moon goes through its course. In other words, every thing that God has created is obedient to Him and submits to Him i.e. is a Muslim.

The human is one of the two creatures of God that are given the freedom to choose i.e. the ability of volition. And thus, we can either choose to submit to Him or otherwise. The idea that peace is a result of submission to God is clear from the fact that every other creature submits to Him, and that is the reason why these creatures are at peace with the system that they are part of.

Muslims believe that most of the world religions are revealed religions, in other words, true in their origins i.e. they teach about the oneness of God. This understanding is of major importance as it facilitates a spirit of toleration and forbearance towards other religions and in the mean time encourages Muslims to search the true origins of other religions and understand them from the root up. To explain further, it is the later adulteration of those true religions with fictitious tales and romanticism of their early propagators by their later adherents that has rendered them all ineffective and sometimes even absurd. This teaching of Islam is a blessing to Muslims as they can learn

the lesson from other religions and not participate in exaggerations and extra romanticism and thus protect their religion from corruptions.

Most of our youth study about religions and their critiques out of curiosity. They usually find out that the critique of religions are as strong, or stronger in many cases, than most of the religious doctrines. This order is stronger in the case of Christianity. Philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and others, have tried to break the logic inherent in religions by focusing on Christianity mainly, either knowingly or otherwise. This is the true cause of a major confusion amongst many. Religion as a concept is being criticized vastly in the west but what in reality is being criticized is non other than Christianity. Now because Islam is a religion and because Christianity is being criticized under the general name of religion, Islam falls prey to these criticisms.

For instance, the "Holy War" or correctly put, the struggle in the cause of God. "Holy" is a very misused and misunderstood word even by Muslims who try to convey their point in English. This probably is due to the lack of a better word or for the reasons of popularity of this word. In Arabic, the equivalent to the word 'holy' is 'Quddooce'. You will never hear this word referring to any one or thing in Muslim texts but to God alone. So according to Islam nothing is holy but only God. In addition, any thinking man would be repelled by the idea of a war as being described as holy. This is again a misconception stemming from the Christian Crusaders who called their war as holy. According to correct Islamic beliefs, Jihad is done only "fee sabeel-

ullah" meaning, only in the cause of Allah. Furthermore, to clarify the concept of Jihad it is important to understand it in its intended form. There are two types of struggle as pointed out by our beloved messenger (pbuh): The major struggle and the minor struggle. The major struggle refers to fighting against the evils of one's own self and trying to overcome one's own shortcomings, be it educational or otherwise. On the other hand, the minor struggle is that of fighting against those who fight you and force you out of your lands or persecute you for holding firm to your religion. While the latter type of struggle is also of magnanimous importance, it is called farz-e-kefaya. This means that if a part of the Muslims are engaged in it, as long as there is not a need for the engagement of more people, others who may have some excuses, may not participate. The Islamic concept of war is one that is totally in accordance with the international laws of today's world. Islamic law does not allow for a Muslim nation to be the transgressors. Although one may find instances of this in the history, one must be careful before one associates them to Islam.

After stating the above hot topics, one may curiously ask whether any so-called Muslim country upholds Islamic principles correctly. The short answer is no. The overwhelming number of Muslim majority countries is still suffering from the post-trauma of colonization and are still mostly ruled by individuals who do not represent the vast majority of the public of their countries. While some do have Sharia court systems i.e. Saudi Arabia and Iran, they are very choosy of which injunctions to put to practice and which ones to ignore, depending on the

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personal benefits they would derive. When I observe the current humiliating situation of the Muslim world, I remember the saying of my beloved Prophet who said that in the end of the times the Sun is going to rise from the west. Islam could metaphorically be considered as the light and the Sun that is going to shine from the west and illuminate the world.

The majority of Muslims in the east are adherents of Islam culturally. They have corrupted the true and straight way that they were blessed, with traditions that are alien to Islam; thus projecting a bad image to the observing west.

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However, Islamic values are universal and thus always meaningful. In other words, Islam could be considered as the common denominator that gives us the identity as Afghan-Canadians, which can satisfy both the conditions for us of being Afghans and having an established identity as Canadians. As Muslims we can not only satisfy our own spiritual thirst, that is inherent in human nature, but also have an identity which is harmonious with nature, for Islam is also called the natural way.