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WORKING MUSLIMS & CHRISTMAS

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Question:

Q: In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

As-salāmu ‘alaykum wa-rahmatullāhi wa-barakātuh Mufti Amjad Saheb,

The holiday season is about to dawn upon us. I am a practising Muslim and I fully and completely understand and recognise that Christmas has Christian roots. Nevertheless, I live in the West and within the corporate culture I am unable to exist in a vacuum.

My colleagues, due to information freely available in the Media congratulate and send me emails and messages around Eid. Majority of them are not Christians (ideologically or in practise) but Christmas is a time of the year when due to Holidays (their) families come together regardless of actual belief in Christianity.

My questions below should be answered with context and emphasis on life in the West.

My colleagues regularly bring chocolates and sweets to work from the beginning of December. On the specific day of Christmas (and a day before and after) there is usually nobody at work or not many people around. Is it permissible for Muslims to consume these chocolates or sweets (provided that they are Halal)? These are not exclusively for Christmas but all work places seem to be swamped with chocolates in December, nevertheless the theme around it is Christmas.

Workplaces do Christmas lunches and dinners. Due to corporate policies of inclusiveness, you can go to designated restaurants and the company pays for your lunch. Our “Christmas Do” this year is on the 8th of December and the company will

pay for up to £25.00/per person. In this “Christmas Do”, you can order whatever food you wish and drink whatever you wish. Since, most people are driving they don’t drink hard Alcohol but Alcohol is served at the Restaurant and served at the table. I would like to add that I travel as part of work in teams. Most days your team orders dinner and one person charges the bill on their credit card and then expenses the company. We don’t have a choice in this matter and on the same table you could have someone (in the team) drinking beer and Alcohol. “Christmas Do” has roughly the same procedure and someone in Management pays the bills on their corporate credit card. It is not mandatory to attend the “Christmas Do” at all and many don’t attend. What is your guidance in this matter?

As a sign of courtesy and respect, you wish your colleagues and team “Enjoy your Holidays and see you in the New Year...” Mostly you can get away with similar greetings. Is this sort of greeting Islamically valid? What if a Muslim was to add “Merry Christmas” or words of that nature in that greeting?

There are sales during the Christmas period. Is it permissible to purchase items which are permissible using Islamically permissible methods to pay for them, simply because they are cheaper to buy around Christmas time?

A few of us (Muslims) have gotten together for the past few years and after Eidul-Fit’r we pool together and buy free Samosas and distribute it to everyone at work on all sites. These Samosas are clearly marked as “Eid Samosas” and this has gone a long way in highlighting Muslims and Islamic traditions in workplace. Due to the success of “Eid Samosas”, we have tried “Welcome Ramadhan Samosas” for the last two years. HR has clearly picked this up and they have

started to recognise the start and end of Ramadhan. Would you have any comments on this matter?

Would you have any other advice for Muslims in the West?

Jazakallahu Khayran

Question, *as received*.

Response:

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هو الموفق
حامدا ومصليا ومسلما
الجواب ومنه الصواب

The query was deliberated amongst the Scholars at Department of *Dārul-Iftaa (Wifaqul Ulama)* and the conclusion reached after discussion was as follows:

In this article we set out to articulate the differences between culture and religion. We are demarcating religious practices and social/cultural practices and this difference is fundamental in understanding the issue.

Pagan & Christian roots:

You have stated that you are aware and recognise that Christmas has Christian roots. Christmas certainly has Christian roots and origins. We can take it back even further and talk about pagan influence. Scandinavia used to celebrate the “Viking Yule”¹ around the 21st of December when the winter solstice² used to begin. The romans marked a festival known as

the “Saturnalia”³ which again led up to the winter solstice. There were other pagan practises and we see a gradual Christianisation of these practises. Originally, the Christians celebrated Easter and the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. There are Christians even today who do not celebrate Christmas⁴. It is only in the 4th century that we see the emphasis and celebration of the birth of Jesus becoming institutionalised⁵, although some evidence suggests that the original celebrations might have been around spring time. It was Pope Julius I⁶ who selected the 25th of December⁷ to be Christmas and his reasons were to absorb the pagan “Saturnalia” festival. We need to keep these changes in mind. The Christianisation of pagan cultures does not mean that the pagan roots have disappeared.

Reciprocation of greetings:

You say that your colleagues congratulate you around Eid time due to prevalence of information (on the media) and majority of them are not Christians (either ideologically or in practise). According to the religious or personal beliefs of your colleagues, they may consider it permissible to congratulate others on their religious festivities. However, this is not the position in Islām. Why is it not sound according to Islām? Why does Islām not allow the same sharing of congratulations or greeting to be reciprocated when it is sound in another faith, e.g. Christianity? This is not specific to Islām. In some other faiths e.g. Judaism⁸ you may find some restrictions. Those of the Judaic faith who are not involved in Interfaith work, you will rarely find them extending specific congratulatory greetings around Christmas, Ramadhan or Eid⁹. It is not just Muslims who

¹ <http://skandland.com/vikxmas.htm>

² <http://earthsky.org/?p=2951>

³ <http://www.historytoday.com/matt-salusbury/did-romans-invent-christmas>

⁴ <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/christians-who-dont-celebrate-christmas-heres-why>

⁵ <http://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas>

⁶ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08561a.htm>

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⁸ <https://www.whychristmas.com/customs/25th.shtml>

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⁹ <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/1216/Is-it-OK-to-wish-Jews-a-Merry-Christmas>

⁹ http://www.aish.com/atr/Seasons_Greetings.html

will act in this manner around the holiday season, certain Jews will act this way and they also have some restrictions on congratulating people of other religions. What we are trying to assert is that we do not have to reciprocate a certain greeting because reciprocating it implies that we believe that particular practise is sound (according to our religion) when we don't believe it to be. We would like to say that we are all free to practise whichever religion we choose, and this is the beauty of British society which, is unfortunately under strain with scrutiny on Muslims and Islām. It appears that we are being judged by a different yardstick to others. The fact your colleagues are coming together to congratulate is not relevant here because the relevance here is origins and underpinnings of the action. On the day of Eid, we see certain Muslims getting together not because this is a day emphasised and recognised in Islām but they are getting together because it is a day their family gets together. Are these Muslims practising a religious act? Yes, they are, although they are nominal Muslims and may not even recognise the religious significance or connotations of Eid.

The prohibition on reciprocating greetings at the time of other religion's festivities is not based on whether your colleagues' intentions are religious or not. The prohibition is based on the origins and underpinnings of the action.

Lack of Dāwāh

Muslims have now lived in the west for 60-70 years and yet our non-Muslim friends, colleagues and neighbours do not understand that we cannot reciprocate their greetings (of religious acts) and well wishes (of religious festivals). It is possible that some may take offense. Is it the fault of our non-Muslim

friends, colleagues and neighbours? Certainly not! It is our fault for not educating them about our religion and not taking the time to explain our position to them.

Chocolates & sweets:

You have then asked about colleagues bringing chocolates to work and alluded to the fact that most workplaces are swamped with chocolates around the holiday season. If the intention of the person bringing the chocolates is to celebrate Christmas then there are religious connotations and (religious) celebrations. The foundations of Christianity (in broad terms) is that Jesus is the son of God and Christmas is the celebration of his birth, so the celebration of Christmas does have religious basis. Although, Muslims believe in Jesus being a prophet and Messiah¹⁰. The difference of belief regarding Jesus is not just unique to Islam, Judaism¹¹ also differs with Christian beliefs about Jesus¹². Thus, the religious basis of Christmas stands at complete juxtaposition to Islām's view of understanding not only Jesus (Peace be upon Him) but also God. We would like to reiterate and emphasise that this does not mean that we hate Christians, or we hate those who celebrate Christmas; we live in a pluralistic, multicultural society and we share our lives, our work, our neighbourhoods with our non-Muslim friends, colleagues and neighbours. Similar to how we are entitled to practise what we wish, they are entitled to practise what they wish to practise. We disagree with their beliefs regarding Jesus and the connotations of their beliefs and concept of Christmas clashes with our beliefs in not only Jesus but also unity of God. If the chocolates are brought specifically for Christmas, then they won't be permissible for Muslims to consume but if they are bought for end of year like in schools, when sometimes you have end

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/isa.shtml>

¹¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/what-do-jews-believe-about-jesus/>

¹²

<http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48892792.html?s=srcon>

of the year party or whatever other (social) reasons there maybe then it is a social matter. Many people (as you have pointed out) may not have a religious bone in their body but because it is the end of the year they bring in chocolates then it would be permissible to consume these on the above basis. The default position would be not to consume these chocolates unless you know that the person is not religious in anyway shape or form and they are doing it for social reasons.

It should be noted that this entire discussion pertains to edible items with ingredients which are permissible in Islām. If the items were not permissible to consume, the discussion around Christmas or social events would be irrelevant and it will not be permissible for a Muslim to consume them.

Christmas Do

Your next query is regarding the “Christmas Do”. When it comes to “Christmas Do” then it is abundantly clear that individuals are celebrating Christmas and there is no ambiguity in it. Irrespective of the belief system of the individuals the theme is there. We have pointed out that there may be some Muslims who get together with their families around Eid, merely due to social reasons and because everybody is gathering together but it does not take the religious significance and underpinnings of Eid. These Muslims will not even have a sound belief system according to Islām but they still celebrate Eid, and their involvement and celebration does not take away the Islāmic foundation and underpinnings of Eid. The celebration of Eid would still be considered as a religious act regardless of the involvement of individuals (of varying beliefs), same applies to “Christmas Do”. Thus, religious connotations continue until the religion itself removes the religious significance and underpinnings. We recommend not to attend the “Christmas Do”.

If this is an awkward then we have to check as to why this is awkward and why are we not sharing our religion with our work colleagues. Why are we not explaining our belief system to them? Once they have been explained, they can make their own judgement because if you are a decent person, who mixes in, gets on with others and does good work then they would see that you are not isolating yourself but you are taking a principled stance due to your belief. We believe that these matters are very often misrepresented, misconstrued and misunderstood as lack of integration. This is not a lack of integration! This is a Muslim not celebrating an aspect of Christian faith and not celebrating Christian acts. This is a Muslim choosing not to celebrate Christian acts. If this Muslims chooses to celebrate or participate in Christian acts it would go beyond integration and into assimilation. It would imply that the belief system of this individual has been assimilated or that this person has converted from Islām to Christianity or he has adopted a hybrid religion of Christianity and Islam and that is not what this person believes to be. He or she is a Muslim and he or she defines himself or herself as a Muslim. We cannot buy into the right-wing propaganda that simply because a person does not celebrate Christmas greeting or exchange gifts at Christmas or does not partake in the “Christmas Do” or in other Christmas activities like secret Santa that this person is an isolationist, not integrating, hates British values and does not want to be part of British society. This is nonsense and misrepresentation of integration. Integration occurs at a social level and we see Muslims on a social level in all forms of life (in Britain) across many spheres of work from teaching to the NHS. Muslims are part and parcel of public services, councillors, politicians, mayors, members of Parliament etc. They have integrated fully while remaining Muslims. This is important to understand that they have contributed and continue to do so to the British society while remaining as Muslims.

How to greet?

You have then asked about the greeting and the wordings of it.

Any mention of Christmas has religious connotations and it is part of a religious act whether the participants believes in that religious act or not. This is at complete odds with the faith of Muslims. Since it is in opposition to our faith and we live in a pluralistic, multicultural society we are within our rights to practise our religion. We understand that some (or many) may not be celebrating Christmas as Christians but the fact remains it is tied to Christianity unless and until Christianity as a whole and as majority remove that connotation. We realise that there are some differences of opinions within Christianity about Christmas but in general and on the whole religious acts continue to take place within these days like mass, for example. People are free to choose but from an Islāmic perspective we cannot escape and turn away from clear Christian connotations to Christmas. We (as Muslims) cannot wish them well in a religious act which is at odds with our belief. Can we then say, “Enjoy your holidays and see you in the New Year...”? You can say that, but it may be interpreted as tacit approval on your part to certain activities which are done at this time of the year and are at odds with your faith. To elaborate if you knew that a Muslim was heading to a pub would you wish him with, “Have a good time, enjoy yourself?” We know where he is going and the activities at such a venue would be at odds with our moral values so we would not wish him as such because such activities would morally stand against the teachings of Islām.

So, what should a Muslim do and what is permissible?

Family Values

Family values are important to Muslims and central to the teachings of Islām. They are also

British values and we have a dire need to strengthen the bonds of family in our time. We can say something along the lines, “Have a good time with your family and I look forward to seeing you next year...” or words to that effect. There is no harm in this and these are social greetings.

In this article we set out to articulate the differences between culture and religion. We are demarcating religious practices and social/cultural practices and this difference is fundamental in understanding the issue.

Christmas Sale

We have gone to some lengths to distinguish between the religious and social practises. The Christmas sale and purchase of Islāmically permissible items does not fall into the category of religious practise. Thus, it will be permissible.

Rāmādhān and Eid Sāmosās

Lastly, you have pointed out that you and colleagues pool together money and you buy and distribute sāmosās to mark and highlight the importance of Rāmādhān and Eid. You have stated that these sāmosās are clearly marked as Rāmādhān and Eid sāmosās.

We reiterate that sadly we have lived in the west for 60-70 years and, yet our non-Muslim friends, colleagues and neighbours do not fully understand our faith as we have not shared our faith. We believe that this is due to a lack of confidence on our part. We have taken the time to explain aspects of our faith in detail and we have found that our non-Muslim friends, colleagues and neighbours have appreciated it. They have felt privileged that we have shared some personal aspects of our faith and they have apologised for not knowing. They have no reason to apologise for us not sharing our faith with them, it is clearly our fault.

We should share our faith.

They should know about certain aspects of our faith and certain festivals, but they will only know when we share our faith.

We are fortunate enough to live in this country where there are voices from different faiths, beliefs and there should be a voice of Islām amongst these voices. We share space amongst these faiths, whether it is physical space (communities, neighbourhoods, school, work etc) or cyber space and our voice should be amongst the various voices. Each of this voice is distinct and should remain distinct.

We see nothing wrong with your practise of Rāmādhān and Eid sāmosās with your non-Muslim colleagues and we see this as a way of counter-balancing the perceived notion of lack of integration.

Advice for Western Muslims

We felt that your question was important and affects many Muslims, so we have taken the time to elaborate in detail. In addition to what has already been stated we advise that you also research the following material:

1. How to live in a secure and peaceful country?¹³
2. The Sound Understanding of al-Walā wa'l-Barā¹⁴
3. The British Deobandees¹⁵
4. Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A Legal Study with Applications¹⁶

1. Mufti Amjad Mohammed
2. Mufti Faisal al-Mahmudi (Canada)
3. Qādhi Imrān Sayed Falāhi
4. Mufti Mohammed Ashfāq
5. Mufti Zakāria Akudi

May *Allāh* preserve them all.

والله أعلم وعلمه أتم

¹³ <http://www.samiruddinbooks.com/pdf/1-eng.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.wifaqululama.co.uk/alwalawalbara/>

¹⁵ <http://www.wifaqululama.co.uk/britishdeobandi/>

¹⁶ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Muslims-Non-Muslim-Lands-Legal-Applications/dp/1903682754>