Exercising our choices

It is normal for a Muslim in any Western society (by Western, I also mean any non-Muslim society) to feel isolated in one way or another. After all, Islam is a way of life, and it affects every aspect of your day to day activities, from the way we dress, to the kind of food we eat and even the way we talk and interact with other people.

Being a minority in any society is quite overwhelming, and it is our basic instinct to try and assimilate and adapt. In any society, it is much easier conform with the rest of the majority, instead of being different and attracting attention to yourself.

Certainly, people's perception of Islam in the past decade has changed, unfortunately for the worse. So, when caught in a society that is non-Muslim, it is much easier to talk, dress and socialize the way the majority of people do. It is often that a person who dresses modestly, eats *halal* food, avoids alcohol and abstains from physical relationships outside of marriage are viewed as being weird, different, maybe a bit odd.

Many people think that Muslims do not have a choice, so for example, when someone wears the hijab, many non Muslims think she does so because she is forced into it. In fact, it is a common perception in Western society to pity Muslims because we apparently don't have freedom to do what we want.

However, let us not forget this. We may have been born as Muslims, some of us may have accepted Islam later in our lives, but for each day that we are Muslim, we do it because it is our choice to remain Muslim! Every time we make *salat* we are confirming and reaffirming our shahada, we are confirming our choice to be and remain Muslims.

We practice that choice every day. No one in society will punish us if we choose to eat non-halal meat, no one is forcing us to wear certain types of clothes, no one is forcing us to abstain from alcohol or illicit relationships. No one in society is there to punish us if we miss *salat* or Ramadhan fasts. No one will penalize us if we don't pay zakat. In fact, it is actually very easy to cheat on these things and no one will know. In a Western society, it is even easier to get away with not observing Islamic principles.

So why do we still observe the principles of Islam? Not because we are forced by society. It is because we, out of <u>our own free will</u>, choose to.

So, let us remember this.

Every time we decline an invitation to go to gatherings which are forbidden by Islam, we are exercising our choice.
Every time we refuse an offer for an alcoholic drink, we are exercising our choice.
Every time we make the *salat* or offer our fast during Ramadhan, we are exercising our choice.
Every time we turn away from gambling, using credit cards, or taking or giving interest, we are exercising our choice.

Every time we reject a societal value that is incompatible with Islam, we are making a choice.

In short, every time we do something *halal* (as in, something permitted under Islam) we are making a choice.
Every time we avoid from doing something *haram* (as in, something forbidden under Islam) we are making a choice.

So, what is that choice?

It is remaining to be Muslim, and in doing so, choosing to do things which please Allah, and to refrain things which anger Allah. Not because we are forced to, not because we are afraid of being punished by our family or society, but because, with each and every one of these actions, we are choosing to walk in the path of Islam. We exercise our choice because we want Allah's pleasure and mercy, not Allah's anger.

Not all choices that we make are the easier options. And yet, we do them anyway. Because, in accepting Islam, we also accept that we will ultimately be accountable for our actions to Allah.

Like all free people, we are merely exercising our choice to dress, talk, act, eat, worship and conduct ourselves in the manner that we choose. And we have chosen Islam, and to be good Muslims.

So, ask ourselves and our friends who pity us, what is there to be pitied? We have made our choice, we are proud to do so, and we will keep on making the same choices again and again!

So, let us consider this scenario (which is very common in a Western society):
A Muslim pressured by his friends or colleagues on when he will start drinking alcohol. He says never, because religion forces him not to. His friends laugh and think that Islam is an oppressive religion.
Or worse, the Muslim then feels pressured and succumbs!
How different it would be if he could instead say that he does not drink, by choice. That he a Muslim by choice. That even though there is no one to stop him, he refrains from drinking alcohol by choice in order to be a good Muslim. Imagine how the questioner will react to that kind of answer. From my personal experience, it is a very effective answer.

So let us from now on, actively remember. We have been granted by Allah with a free will and the capacity to make choices and decisions. What a powerful gift that is. May we exercise this power in a way that pleases Allah, and may we have the strength to make the right choices in everything that we do.

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