

## I Am Only Human

By

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When I am awoken each morning by my parents, sometimes rudely, to perform my *Subuh* prayers, I can't help but think of myself as a Muslim first and foremost, so to when I wound up my night with my pray. Other than prayer times I pretty much think of myself as a person much like any human being.

Certain rituals and Islamic customs force me to be in the Islamic mode so to speak, operating on the programming that "I behave like a Muslim, therefore I am." Apart from prayers, it is other things like adhering to Islamic dress code for ladies, fasting, performing major and minor pilgrimages, greeting each other in the Muslim style and talking about an Islamic education for the children.

Sometimes I like to shout, "Hey, can I just be me, without Islam being tied to my identity?" Does that seem sacrilegious? In many Islamic circles it is. Even in my family I have been brought up to try and be Islamic in all aspects. In the university I became engrossed with trying to make Islam a way of life, all-encompassing, where every action is a devotional act if we do it in the name of Allah the Most Gracious the Most Merciful.

Maybe I am doomed for Hell to some, but now that I am approaching 40, and not a 17 year old happy camper at an Islamic boot camp, I really would just like to think of myself as a human being first and foremost. And may God forgive me if I say that Muslims perhaps would be happier and saner if they think of themselves as just one of the billions human beings on earth striving to find meaning and happiness in a life that inevitably leads to death. While on earth, I want to make the world a little better place for all its denizens, not just Muslims.

In many ways thinking as a Muslim at all times can lead to a blinkered view of the world. Trying to Islamise every single thought and action is not just mind-bending, it can be self-limiting. This is because it leads to this notion of *us* versus *them*, Muslims versus non-Muslims or *halal* (permissible) acts versus *haram* (forbidden) acts. Reducing the great variety of humans into just these two slots not only reduces the richness of life but sets you up for counting differences instead of appreciating commonalities. It can get right down petty if you count things like how some Muslims with this mindset operate. Just one instance, there is this lady who talks about non-Muslims in general as the *kafirun* (infidels) and who patronises only Muslim shops and will not share the same check out counter in supermarkets because of all the pork that gets passed on the same counter. This lady who slept over at my house once, covered all my children's stuffed toys with a cloth as these are unIslamic in her eyes. Her conversations are peppered with bigoted us versus them that it makes me really nauseous.

Yet among many Muslims it seems like a forgone conclusion that we will check ourselves and each other by the Islamic code of conduct. Some will insist to know how you are doing as a Muslim, what Islamic classes and lectures you attend, what kind of upbringing you are giving your children, even what is your relationship with God, to make sure that we are all reminding each other to be good Muslims. It crops up ever so innocently and naturally as if making doubly sure that we are all on the same side. It can get so cloying

that I love to retreat to my friends who happen not to be Muslims.

Now I don't divide my friends as Muslim friends and non-Muslim friends, they are all friends of equal value to me. I share many things in common with both groups and this includes the same kind of schooling and alma mater for some even though we became close when I was in my thirties. I have a friend whom I meet once a year and who is a Chinese man legally married to a Caucasian man and we all get along well. Now I don't see them as Chinese or Caucasian at all, they are Pat and Sam (not their real names) and I love them as individuals. I have been told by well-meaning Muslim friends that I should not condone such relationships and be friends with the likes of them or even for that matter transsexual friends, they are future denizens of Hell so stay clear. But I am only human, I see their beauty in many ways. Pat is generous and loving and Sam is sweet and I am no judge of who ends up where. This is precisely my point. It gets ugly when we prejudge who goes to Heaven and Hell.

In my dealings with non-Muslims, it is less fraught with pressure to be somebody I am not or not prepared to be yet. They find my adherence to Islamic tenets a little quaint even if they respect it. Andrea for one keeps asking me to go dancing publicly and let my hair down literally but I find it hard to do that on my ordinary mode of being. (I have another operating mode which makes it the easiest thing to do, but that's another story). We talk about life, love, news and interests with ease without the obligatory, God willing, Praise the Lord and other Islamic niceties, though I tend to translate it all the same sometimes, with Christian friends.

What I mean about being humans first and Muslim, Christian or Buddhist etc second or third, is to be free to express our human character, to live up to the universal values first and foremost, without finding it necessary to say that this value is an Islamic value first. To be a good neighbour is universal and I need not always say "Oh Islam says you must be a good neighbour. The holy Prophet Muhammad said..." The moment you say that it is as if you forgot that all cultures say that too. For instance when we teach Islam to children and want to make this point on being nice to neighbours, we should also say what other different cultures say about the same thing and the different anecdotes that each have to tell from generation to generation. This would give a complete picture of what it means to be humans.

It is this quest with putting the Islamic stamp to what we do, just like an invisible *halal* stamp or logo, that frazzles me when I just want to relax and be myself. I am first and foremost a human being who is not easily pigeonholed into a slot called Muslim and thereafter to be called a lax Muslim, a pious or moderate or non-extremist kind or whatever label there is out there. My affiliation is not only with Islam, it is with Humanity. My relationship with God is personal to me and is to be judged by my Maker only but if others insist on giving a go at it, I will accept the valid points and the rest of the crap gets flushed down the toilet. Pardon me, I am only human.

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