

## Who is Valentine?

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Most Muslims who indulge in many alien cultural practices, these days, do not know what they are doing. They are just blind followers of their equally blind cultural leaders.

Little do they realise that what they regard as innocent fun may in fact be rooted in paganism. That the symbols they embrace may be symbols of unbelief. That the ideas they borrow may be products of superstition. And that all these may be a negation of what Islam stands for.

Consider Valentine's Day, a day that after dying out a well deserved death in most of Europe - but surviving in Britain and the United States - has suddenly started to emerge across a swath of Muslim countries. Who was Valentine? Why is this day observed?

Legends abound, as they do in all such cases, but this much is clear: Valentine's Day began as a pagan ritual started by Romans in the 4th century BCE to honour Lupercus, the 'god of fertility and flocks'. Its main attraction was a lottery held to distribute young women to young men for 'entertainment and pleasure' - until the next year's lottery.

Among other equally despicable practices associated with this day was the lashing of young women by two young men, clad only in a bit of goatskin and wielding goatskin thongs, who had been smeared with the blood of sacrificial goats and dogs. A lash of the 'sacred' thongs by these 'holy men' was believed to make the women better able to bear children.

As usual, Christianity tried, unsuccessfully, to turn the evil celebration of Lupercalia. It first replaced the lottery of the names of women with a lottery of the names of saints. The idea was that during the following year the young men would emulate the life of the saint whose name they had drawn. Christianity ended up doing in Rome, and elsewhere, as the Romans did.

The idea that you can preserve the appearance of a popular evil and yet somehow turn it to serve the purpose of virtue has survived. Look at all those people who are still trying, helplessly, to use the formats of popular television entertainment to promote good. They might learn something from this episode in history. It failed miserably.

The only success it had was in changing the name of Lupercalia to St Valentine's Day. It was done in the year 496 by Pope Gelasius, in honour of one Saint Valentine. However, there are as many as 50 different Valentines in Christian legends. Two of them are more famous, although their lives and characters are also shrouded in mystery.

According to one legend, which is more in line with the true nature of this celebration, St Valentine was a 'lover's saint' who had himself fallen in love with his jailer's daughter.

Due to serious troubles that accompanied such lottery, French government banned the Valentine ritual in 1776. It also vanished over the years in Italy, Austria, Hungary, and

Germany. Earlier, during the 17th century when the Puritans were strong it had been banned in England, but King Charles II revived it in 1660.

From England the Valentine ritual arrived in the New World, where enterprising Yankees spotted a good means of making money. Esther A Howland who produced, in the 1840s, one of the first commercial American Valentine Day cards called - what else valentines sold \$5,000 worth in the first year. (Then \$5,000 was a lot of money.) The valentine industry has been booming ever since.

It is the same story with Halloween, which has otherwise normal human beings dressing like ghosts and goblins in a re-enactment of an ancient pagan ritual of demon worship.

The pagan name for that event was Samhain (pronounced sow-en). Just as in case of Valentine's Day, Christianity changed its name, but not the pagan moorings.

Five star hotels in Muslim countries arrange Halloween parties so the rich can celebrate the superstitions of a distant period of ignorance that, at one time, even included the shameful practice of human sacrifice.

Christmas is another story. Today Muslim shopkeepers sell and shoppers buy Christmas symbols in Islamabad or Dubai or Cairo. To engage in a known religious celebration of another religion is bad enough. What is worse is the fact that here is another pagan celebration (Saturnalia) that has been changed in name - and in little else - by Christianity.

Even the apparently innocuous celebration might have pagan foundations. According to one account, in pagan cultures, people feared evil spirits, especially on their birthdays. It was a common belief that evil spirits were more dangerous to a person when he or she experienced a change in their daily life, such as turning a year older. So family and friends surrounded the person with laughter and joy on their birthdays to protect them from evil.

How can anyone in his right mind think that Islam would be indifferent to practices steeped in anti-Islamic ideas and beliefs? Islam came to destroy paganism in all its forms: it cannot tolerate any trace of it in the lives of its followers.

Further, Islam is very sensitive about maintaining its purity and the unique identity of its believers. Islamic laws and teachings go to extra lengths to ensure it.

For example, salâh is forbidden at the precise times of sunrise, transition and sunset to eliminate the possibility that it might get mixed up or be confused with the practice of sun worship. To the voluntary recommended fast on the tenth of Muharram, Muslims are required to add another day (9th or 11th) to distinguish it from the then prevalent Jewish practice. Muslims are forbidden to emulate the appearance of non-Muslims.

A Muslim is a Muslim for life. During joys and sorrows, during celebrations and sufferings, we must follow the one straight path - not many divergent paths. It is a great tragedy that under the constant barrage of commercial and cultural propaganda from the forces of Jahiliya and the relentless media machine, Muslims have begun to embrace the Valentines, the Halloween ghosts, and even Santa Claus.