



Maintaining Islamic Identity in Non-Islamic Celebrations

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Islam guides the believer in every matter - from worship to social interaction - ensuring that our faith remains pure while our character remains graceful. Living in a country like Australia, Muslims frequently encounter social or cultural festivities that do not originate from Islam. The challenge is to balance kindness and community participation with faithfulness to the limits set by the Sharī'ah.

Allāh ﷻ says in the Holy Qur'ān:

وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ

"And indeed, this is My Straight Path, so follow it, and do not follow other ways, lest they lead you away from His path." (Sūrah al-An'ām: 153)

The Prophet ﷺ emphasised this clarity of direction when he said:

مَنْ تَشَبَّهَ بِقَوْمٍ فَهُوَ مِنْهُمْ

"Whoever imitates a people is one of them." (Narrated by Abū Dāwūd)

He ﷺ further taught that our loyalty must always remain with Allāh ﷻ:

لَا طَاعَةَ لِمَخْلُوقٍ فِي مَعْصِيَةِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ

"There is no obedience to any created being if it involves disobedience to Allāh, may He be glorified and exalted." (Musnad Aḥmad, 1095)

And in another profound narration, the Prophet ﷺ said:

مَنْ التَّمَسَّ رِضَا اللَّهِ بِسَخَطِ النَّاسِ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ وَأَرْضَى عَنْهُ النَّاسُ، وَمَنْ التَّمَسَّ رِضَا النَّاسِ بِسَخَطِ اللَّهِ سَخَطَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَأَسَخَطَ عَلَيْهِ النَّاسُ

"Whoever seeks Allāh's pleasure by something that displeases people, Allāh will be pleased with him and will cause the people to be pleased with him. But whoever seeks to please people through something displeasing to Allāh, then Allāh will be displeased with him, and He will make the people displeased with him." (Ibn Ḥibbān)

These texts set the tone for our discussion: a Muslim's path is guided by divine principles, and our identity is shaped by loyalty to Allāh ﷻ above all else. Living in a multicultural society like Australia means encountering many celebrations and practices; yet our responsibility is to engage with kindness without compromising our beliefs. The believer's compass remains steady - seeking Allāh's pleasure, following His straight path, and avoiding imitation that conflicts with our Islamic identity.

Distinguishing Between Culture and Religion

Islam recognises that not all customs ('ādāt) are acts of worship ('ibādāt). The Ḥanafī scholars emphasised that the ruling on an act depends on its intention, context, and meaning. For example, the eminent Ḥanafī jurist Imām al-Kāsānī writes in Badā'i' al-Ṣanā'i': "An act resembling another nation is judged by the purpose behind it - if done for resemblance, it is blameworthy; if done for a worldly need or neutral habit, it remains permissible."

So the first pivot is this: we must ask: Is a celebration or custom being undertaken as part of someone's religious identity ('ibādah) or ritual belonging to another faith community? Or is it a neutral social custom ('urf) which might be permissible? The Ḥanafī school provides three-fold criteria:

1. Intention (niyyah): Are you partaking because you intend to adopt their ritual, their belief, their identity? Or purely for a social reason (e.g., workplace gathering, communal volunteering)?
2. Form/content: Does the celebration involve religious rites, worship, distinctive symbols of another faith?
3. Effect/appearance: Will your participation lead to confusion about your identity as a Muslim, or effectively signal you share that other religious identity?

For instance, attending a gathering of non-Muslims to socialise is vastly different than attending a ritual service of non-Muslims or engaging in their prescribed worship. The Ḥanafī jurists remain clear: if the act involves imitation (tashabbuh) in what is distinctive to non-Muslims (especially in worship), then it is prohibited. At the same time, they allow for acts which are purely worldly or socially neutral and not distinctive of another faith.

Thus, we should distinguish between culture and religion. Participating in generic social festivities (cakes, balloons, friendly greeting cards) is not automatically impermissible, whereas participating in an explicit religious festival of another faith (with their worship, symbolism, or religious rites) is impermissible within the Ḥanafī framework.

Maintaining Distinction Without Hostility

It is important to emphasise that while we uphold our Islamic identity and maintain the boundaries set by our faith, we must do so with good character, kindness, and social grace. Allāh ﷻ says:

لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِّنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَن تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ

"Allāh does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being kind and just towards them." (Sūrah al-Mumtaḥanah: 8)

Accordingly, Ḥanafī jurists stress the importance of maintaining dignity and courtesy while avoiding tashabbuh. When declining participation in a non-Islamic religious festivity, Muslims should do so politely, explaining their position with wisdom and respect (ḥikmah wa-ma'rūf). One should avoid disdain or isolating oneself socially, but also avoid giving the impression of validating or participating in another faith's worship.

Hence, the balanced approach is:

- Refuse the ritual element when it belongs to another faith's worship.
- Participate in the social element when it is neutral and does not conflict with one's faith.
- Explain courteously if required - especially in the workplace or educational setting - so that one's refusal is based on faith principle and not social snubbing.
- Remain engaged in society positively, so as to represent Islam's beauty and integrity.

Living as a Minority in Australia

Australia is a multicultural, multi-faith society. Muslims are often invited to festivals, celebrations, cultural events, workplace gatherings, school events, community fairs. The question becomes: under what circumstances can a Muslim attend, and when should they refrain? The Holy Qur'ān reminds us:

وَلَنْ تَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ

“Never will the Jews or the Christians be pleased with you until you follow their way.” (Sūrah al-Baqarah: 120)

This verse is often discussed in terms of not yielding one’s religious conviction, while at the same time remaining peaceful and kind in daily relations. In Australia, Muslims may engage positively with civic life - festivals, work functions, school functions - provided they preserve their faith boundaries.

Here are certain typical scenarios:

Workplace social gathering: If the invitation is to a purely social event (e.g., team-lunch, year-end BBQ), with no religious ceremony or symbolism of another faith, then participation is generally permissible (mubāḥ) under Ḥanafī considerations of social custom (‘urf) and necessity (ḍarūrah).

School or community event with religious content: If the event includes a religious ritual (for example, lighting a candle for a Christian “service”, prayer of another faith, or worship element) then a Muslim should ideally decline or attend only in a non-participant capacity (spectator) with clarity of intention.

Cultural festivals tied to religious origins: If the celebration has origins in another religion (e.g., Nowruz, Christmas, Easter) and the Muslim’s participation would signal endorsement of their underlying religious meaning, then the more cautious majority of Ḥanafī scholars regard the act as prohibited (ḥarām) or at least strongly discouraged (makrūh).

Neutral civic celebrations (Australia Day, national day, community market, inter-faith picnic): If these are purely civic and non-religious, then there is room for participation - with the intention of social harmony, not worship or religious endorsement. The Ḥanafī jurist Ibn ‘Ābidīn in Radd al-Muḥtār writes:

“If a Muslim attends their gathering without partaking in their religious acts, and only for worldly necessity, there is no sin, though abstaining remains superior.”

In other words, participation is permissible so long as the distinct line of worship and religious identity is not crossed. But better is to abstain if doubt remains and one’s presence might be misunderstood.

From a practical Australian classroom or school setting (which you as a teacher may encounter), this means:

If the school has a “Christmas concert” with Christian prayers, a Muslim may respectfully attend but should refrain from participating in the prayer or religious ceremony.

If the school has a “Multicultural Day” featuring food, music, cultural dress, and no religious ritual, the Muslim’s participation can be positive and building bridges - just ensure that no part of the event involves compromising one’s Islamic identity.

If colleagues invite a Muslim for “Trick or Treat” or Halloween costume party, the scholar majority would caution that the origin of Halloween is pagan and animistic, and the participation might signal religious endorsement. Many Ḥanafī-influenced fatāwā deem participation impermissible.

When invited to a non-Islamic wedding or festival: attending is permissible if the event is wholly social, there is no religious ritual conflicting with Islam, and you refrain from participating in the non-Muslim religious acts.

This balanced approach allows the Muslim to maintain respectful engagement in Australian society while preserving the distinctness of their identity and faith.

Our Own Joys and Celebrations

Islam does not remove joy, festivity or communal celebration - it provides it in a way that is rooted in faith and purposeful. The Prophet ﷺ says in a ḥadīth:

لِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ عِيدٌ، وَهَذَا عِيدُنَا

“Every nation has its own festival, and this is our festival.” (Narrated by al-Bukhārī, Muslim)

This makes clear that Muslims have their own special festivals: primarily ‘Eīd al-Fiṭr and ‘Eīd al-Aḍḥā. Within the Ḥanafī school, the joyful celebration of ‘Eīd is considered a Sunnah Mu’akkadah, a strongly emphasised tradition of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions.

Families and Muslim communities are encouraged to make ‘Eīd a time of festivity and togetherness - so that children and youth feel the belonging and joy within Islamic tradition rather than seeking external, non-Islamic substitutes. This involves: attending the ‘Eīd Ṣalāh, giving the zakāh or Fiṭr, visiting family, sharing meals, wearing nice clothes, giving small gifts, taking time off usual work if possible, and reminding ourselves of the gratitude to Allah.

In fact, the distinct Muslim celebration helps anchor identity and gives the believer experience of communal joy that is not borrowed from other faiths. It reinforces that Muslims are not culturally deprived nor socially isolated - rather, they have their own vibrant heritage.

When Participation Becomes a Test

As with many issues in Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), participation in communal life becomes a test of nuance, principle, and intention. The Ḥanafī school acknowledges that necessity (ḍarūrah) and legitimate social custom (‘urf) can moderate rulings. For example: being present at a children’s school gathering may be socially expected; the employer may host an end-of-year party. In such cases, a Muslim may attend provided they avoid participating in any non-Islamic ritual element.

The scholars (including Ibn ‘Ābidīn) permit attending a gathering if the gathering itself is general, the Muslim’s role is non-religious, and their intention is purely social or professional. But if the gathering involves a religious ritual or is designed to mark a non-Muslim religious festival, then attendance becomes problematic: it could constitute endorsement, imitation, or confusion of identity.

To help navigate this, here are key warning signs that participation may slip into impermissibility:

- The event has religious symbolism, prayers, hymns, worship or rituals from another faith.

- Your participation would imply you share that faith or its ritual.
- The event uses symbols or imagery distinctive of another faith.
- Your presence would blur the line between your Muslim identity and the other faith.
- Attendance is optional but strongly encouraged in a manner that threatens your Muslim identity.

Conversely, if the event is wholly social, the Muslim attends as guest only, does not join in any worship or ritual, and maintains a clear Muslim intention and identity, then many Ḥanafī-influenced fatāwā mark this as permissible (mubāḥ). The guiding principle is: avoid tashabbuh (imitation) in the realm of religious ritual, but engage with courtesy and integrity in the realm of social life.

Guiding Principles

Here are the distilled guiding principles from the Ḥanafī perspective, adapted to a minority-context like Australia:

- Avoid all forms of shirk or imitation (tashabbuh) in worship - these are unequivocally ḥarām.
- Avoid attending rituals identified with another faith, even as a spectator - this is at least makrūh taḥrīmī (strongly disliked to prohibited) depending on contents.
- If attendance is purely social or professional, and there is no religious symbolism or worship, participating is mubāḥ, provided the intention is clear and identity as Muslim remains unaffected.
- Politeness and respect are essential when declining invitations - your refusal should not come from bitterness but from principle, with kindness and explanation if appropriate.
- Honour our own Eid and Islamic traditions to strengthen community identity - so that our children do not look elsewhere for belonging or joy.
- Live in society with integrity - reflecting the dignity of Islam, engaging with neighbours, colleagues and friends, but without compromising religious boundaries.
- In all actions, monitor intention: are you doing this for the sake of pleasing Allāh ﷻ, or simply to fit in? Acts that are only for imitation and to follow others, without any deeper intention, are liable to be blameworthy.

The Spirit of Wisdom and Balance

Islam was revealed to perfect noble character. The Prophet ﷺ says in a ḥadīth:

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ

"I was sent only to perfect noble character." (Musnad Aḥmad)

Thus, maintaining Islamic limits is not about drifting into rigidity, isolation or suspicion - but about walking a path of wisdom (ḥikmah), dignity, and respect. A Muslim living in Australia is not called to cut themselves off from society. Rather, they are called to engage positively, to serve the community, to reflect the excellent character of their faith, and to set boundaries so the purity of their identity is preserved.

The Ḥanafī approach offers this two-fold ethos:

1) Affirmation of identity: We have our own celebrations, our own rituals, our own values. By embracing them we anchor ourselves as Muslims, so that we are not tempted to adopt the celebrations of others in search of belonging.

2) Affectionate engagement: We treat others with kindness and respect, we participate socially when appropriate, and we contribute to the broader society - but without compromising or diluting our religious distinctiveness.

It is in this tension of fidelity and civility that the believer shines: neither pharisaical isolation nor blind assimilation, but grounded in Islam and engaged with the world.

Conclusion

The ruling on participating in non-Islamic festivities is not a simple “yes/no” but depends on intention, context, and content. If the act involves religious imitation (tashabbuh) of another faith, it is ḥarām. If it risks confusion of identity or participation in something unique to another faith, it is makrūh (strongly discouraged to forbidden). If it is purely social or professional, with no religious conflict, it is mubāḥ.

Likewise, it becomes ḥarām to attend any gathering or celebration where ḥarām elements are present: alcohol being served and consumed, music playing, free mixing of genders, or ḥarām food being offered. These environments harm the believer’s dignity and compromise Islamic identity. However, if attendance is **absolutely necessary** - due to work commitments or unavoidable circumstances - then one may attend only briefly, simply to show their presence. Even then, the believer must guard their gaze, avoid consuming any food, and protect themselves from anything impermissible. One should stay only for the minimal time required, avoid mingling, and hold firmly to the honour of their Islamic identity.

Lastly, During the festive seasons, shopping centres are filled with non-Islamic activities such as greeting figures associated with other religions or faith traditions. It is prohibited for Muslims to engage in these or send our children to sit with such figures for photos, as such practices have no place in Islam and contradict our values and identity.

Living in a minority context such as Australia demands this delicate balance: contributing positively to society, being good citizens and neighbours, while preserving the uniqueness of Islam in our lives. As the Qur’ān says:

وَمَنْ يُعَظِّمْ شَعَائِرَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِنْ تَقْوَى الْقُلُوبِ

“Whoever honours the symbols of Allāh - indeed, it is from the piety of hearts.” (Sūrah al-Ḥajj: 32)

And we conclude with the du‘ā’:

اللَّهُمَّ ثَبِّتْ قُلُوبَنَا عَلَى دِينِكَ

“O Allāh, keep our hearts firm upon Your religion.”

May Allāh give us the wisdom to live with grace in our society, to give joy to our children within the framework of Islam, and to interact with our neighbours with excellence of character - all while keeping our identity pure, our boundaries clear, and our deeds pleasing to Him.

References:

- Imām al-Kāsānī, Badā’i‘ al-Ṣanā’i‘ fī Tartīb al-Sharā’i‘, Vol. 6.
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