45200 - Ruling on Imitating the Disbelievers

the question

What is the Islamic ruling on the issue of imitating the disbelievers in their customs and dealings? What are the guidelines concerning that in Islamic Shari`ah?

Is every imitation of the actions of the disbelievers regarded as a haram kind of imitation – knowing that there are many things that the disbelievers do that are not haram and are not condemned by Shari`ah, where the one who does them does not do them merely to imitate the disbelievers, but because he thinks those things are good, as Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) said: "What the Muslims think is good is good before Allah"?

Please advise us, may Allah honour you, and please give me a detailed answer and explain to me the guidelines on this matter.

Summary of answer

1- Islam forbids the Muslims to imitate the disbelievers, especially the Jews and Christians, but this prohibition does not apply to all their affairs, rather it applies to matters of their religion and things that are unique to them, by which they are known.
2- The Muslims have no need to imitate any of the other nations in matters of religious rituals and acts of worship.
3- The prohibition on imitating the disbelievers does not apply to the things that they do and invent from which Muslims may benefit. There is no sin on the Muslims if they share in that, rather the Muslims should be in the forefront of such things.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The Muslims have no need to imitate other nations

The Muslims have no need to imitate any of the other nations in matters of religious rituals and acts of worship, for Allah has perfected His Religion and completed His Favour, and chosen for us Islam as our religion, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My Favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” [Al-Maidah 5:3]

Islam forbids the Muslims to imitate the disbelievers , especially the Jews and Christians, but this prohibition does not apply to all their affairs, rather it applies to matters of their religion and things that are unique to them, by which they are known.

It was narrated from Abu Sa’id al-Khudri (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “You will certainly follow the ways of those who came before you hand span by hand span, cubit by cubit, to the extent that if they entered the hole of a lizard, you will enter it too.” We said: “O Messenger of Allah, (do you mean) the Jews and the Christians?” He said: “Who else?” (Narrated by al-Bukhari, 1397; Muslim, 4822)

This hadith indicates that it is haram to imitate the Jews and the Christians, and that those who follow them and tread the same path as them are criticized. Islam has reinforced this prohibition, by describing those who imitate the disbelievers as being of them.

It was narrated that ‘Abd-Allah ibn ‘Umar said: The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever imitates a people is one of them.” (Narrated by Abu Dawud, 3512; classed as sahih by al-Albani in Irwa al-Ghalil, 2691)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“This at the very least indicates that it is haram to imitate them, although the apparent meaning is that the one who imitates them is a disbeliever.” (Iqtida al-Sirat al-Mustaqim, 237)

The one who imitates the disbelievers feels inferior and defeated, so he hastens to make up for his

feelings of inadequacy by imitating those whom he admires. If these people were to ponder the greatness of Islamic Shari`ah and understand how corrupt is that civilization they are running after, they would realize that they are doing wrong and that they have forsaken something that is perfect and true for something that is imperfect and corrupt.

The types of forbidden imitation of the disbelievers

The types of imitation which are forbidden to us are many.

Shaykh Salih al-Fawzan said:

“The things in which the disbelievers are imitated include acts of worship, such as imitating them in matters of shirk, such as building (structures) over graves, building shrines and exaggerating about them. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “May the curse of Allah be upon the Jews and the Christians, for they took the graves of their Prophets as places of worship.” (Al-Bukhari, 425; Muslim, 531) And he told us that when a righteous man among them died, they would build a place of worship over his grave, and install images therein, and that they were the most evil of mankind. (Al-Bukhari, 417; Muslim, 528) Nowadays there are instances of major shirk because of exaggeration concerning graves, as is well known to scholars and ordinary folk alike. The cause of that is imitation of the Jews and Christians.

Another example is their imitation of the festivals of shirk and bid’ah, such as birthday celebrations, whether it is the birthday of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or the birthdays of presidents and kings. Or these festivals of bid’ah and shirk may be named after days or weeks, such as a country’s national day or independence day, or Mother’s Day, or hygiene week, and other days or weeks that are celebrated. All of these have come to the Muslims from the disbelievers, for Islam has only two festivals: ‘Eid al-Fitr and ‘Eid al-Adha. Anything else is bid’ah and an imitation of the disbelievers.” (From a khutbah entitled al-Haththth ‘ala Mukhalafat al-Kuffar (Exhortation to be distinct from the disbelievers)

In the answer to question no. 47060 , we have stated that it is forbidden to imitate the disbelievers in the clothing that is unique to them and in the customs that are unique to them, such as

imitating them by shaving the beard.

Guidelines on imitating the disbelievers

The prohibition on imitating the disbelievers applies to their acts of worship and the customs that are unique to them and by which they are distinguished, not the things that they do and invent from which we may benefit. There is no sin on the Muslims if they share in that, rather the Muslims should be in the forefront of such things.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymin said:

“With regard to the phrase “imitation of the disbelievers”, that does not mean that we should not use anything that they have manufactured. No one says such a thing. At the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and afterwards the people used to wear clothes made by the disbelievers and use vessels made by them.

Imitation of the disbelievers means imitating their clothing and appearance, and the customs that are unique to them. It does not mean that we should not ride what they ride or wear what they wear. But if they ride in a specific way that is unique to them, then we should not ride in that way. If they tailor their clothes in a certain fashion that is unique to them, we should not do likewise. But if we have cars that are similar to theirs and fabric that is similar to theirs, there is nothing wrong with that.” (Majmu’ Fatawa al-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymin, 12, question 177)

And he said:

“The definition of imitating is when the imitator does something that is unique to those whom he is imitating. Imitation of the disbelievers refers to when a Muslim does something that is one of their unique characteristics. With regard to that which has become widespread among the Muslims and is no longer something by which the disbelievers are distinguished, then this is not imitation of the disbelievers, and it is not haram because it is an imitation, unless it is haram for some other reason. What we have said is what is indicated by the meaning of the word tashabbuh (imitation).” (Majmu’ Fatawa al-Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymin, 12, question 198)

In the answer to question no. 21694 , you will find a detailed discussion of the ruling on imitating the disbelievers. Please see question no. 43160 for further details.

Beneficial things and harmful things in non-Muslim civilization

There are both beneficial things and harmful things in non-Muslim civilization. We should not ignore the good things and take the harmful things. This attitude was summed up by Shaykh al-Shanqiti (may Allah have mercy on him) who said:

“Our attitude towards western civilization may be one of four things, and there is no fifth:

1. Ignoring this civilization, good points and bad alike.
2. Adopting it in whole, good points and bad.
3. Adopting the bad things and not the good.
4. Adopting the good things and not the bad.

The first three are undoubtedly wrong and only one of them is undoubtedly good, which is the last one.” (Adwa al-Bayan, 4/382)

Interpretation of “What the Muslims think is good is good before Allah”

With regard to the words of ‘Abd-Allah ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him), “What the Muslims think is good is good before Allah”, this does not refer to things that go against Shari`ah but which may be deemed good on the basis of rational thinking. Imam al-Shafi`i (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “Whoever thinks something is good issuing a ruling.” It does not refer to when one person thinks a thing is good but the majority of people do not. Rather this phrase may be interpreted in one of two ways, both of which are sound:

- That what is meant is traditions and customs that do not go against Shari`ah
- That what is meant is the proof of scholarly consensus, for the Muslims are unanimously agreed that thinking a thing is good is consensus which counts as evidence. So this thing must be good before Allah as well. This is what is indicated by the words, “What the Muslims

think is good.” (See al-Mabsut by al-Sarkhasi, 12/138’ al-Farusiyyah by Ibn al-Qayyim, p. 298)

These interpretations mentioned above are applicable if we take the words of Ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him) as applying to all the Muslims in general. But from the context it seems that he is referring to the Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) only, and not others. What Ibn Mas’ud said was: “Allah looked into the hearts of His slaves and found that the heart of Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was the best of all His slaves’ hearts. So He chose him for Himself and sent him with His Message. Then He looked into the hearts of all His slaves after the heart of Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and He found that the hearts of his Companions were the best of all His slaves’ hearts, so He made them the helpers of His Prophet, fighting for the sake of His religion. So what the Muslims think is good is good before Allah and whatever the Muslims think is bad is bad before Allah.” (Narrated by Ahmad, 3418; classed as sahih by Shaykh al-Alaani in Takhrij al-Tahawiyyah, 530)

Whatever the case, it is not correct to quote the words of Ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him) as evidence for thinking as good that which is forbidden in Islam, such as imitating the mushrikin.

For more, please see these answers: 2322 , 1130 , and 69789 .

And Allah knows best.