4839 - The problem of Muslims’ linguistic assimilation in foreign countries

the question

We Muslims who live in foreign countries are faced with the problem of linguistic assimilation, whereby we speak the language of the Kuffaar in the west in a conscious or unconscious effort to get along with the people around us, and because we are influenced by the environment we are in. What is the Islamic view of this problem, and how can we overcome it?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Haleem ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) spoke very effectively about this problem, explaining its seriousness and effects, and the Islamic viewpoint concerning it. This is what he said:

“As for becoming accustomed to talking to one another in a language other than Arabic, which is the symbol of Islam and the language of the Qur’aan, so that this becomes a habit in the land, with one’s family and household members, with one’s friends, in the marketplace, when addressing government representatives or authority figures or when speaking to people of knowledge, undoubtedly this is makrooh (disliked), because it involves being like the non-Arabs, which is makrooh, as stated previously.

Hence when the early Muslims went to live in Syria and Egypt, where the people spoke Byzantine Greek, and in Iraq and Khurasaan, where the people spoke Farsi, and the Maghrib (North Africa) where the people spoke Berber, they taught the people of those countries to speak Arabic, so that Arabic became the prevalent language in those lands, and all the people, Muslim and kaafir alike, spoke Arabic. Such was also the case in Khurasaan in the past, then they became lax with regard to the language and got used to speaking Farsi until it became prevalent and Arabic was forgotten by most of them. Undoubtedly this is makrooh.

The best way is to become accustomed to speaking Arabic so that the young people will learn it in their homes and schools, so that the symbol of Islam and its people will prevail. This will make it easier for the people of Islam to understand the Qur'aan and Sunnah, and the words of the Salaf, unlike a person who gets used to speaking one language, then wants to learn another, and finds it difficult.

Know that being used to using a language has a clear and strong effect on one's thinking, behaviour and religious commitment. It also has an effect on making one resemble the early generations of this Ummah, the Sahaabah and Taabi'een. Being like them improves one's thinking, religious commitment and behaviour.

Moreover, the Arabic language itself is part of Islam, and knowing Arabic is an obligatory duty. If it is a duty to understand the Qur'aan and Sunnah, and they cannot be understood without knowing Arabic, then the means that is needed to fulfil the duty is also obligatory.

There are things which are obligatory on all individuals (fard 'ayn), and others which are obligatory on the community or ummah (fard kifaayah, i.e., if some people fulfil them the rest are relieved of the obligation).

This is the meaning of the report narrated by Abu Bakr ibn Abi Shaybah who said: 'Eesa ibn Yoonus told us from Thawr from 'Umar ibn Yazeed that 'Umar wrote to Abu Moosa al-Ash'ari (may Allaah be pleased with him) and said: 'learn the Sunnah and learn Arabic; learn the Qur'aan in Arabic for it is Arabic.'

According to another hadeeth narrated from 'Umar (may Allaah be pleased with him), he said: 'Learn Arabic for it is part of your religion, and learn how the estate of the deceased should be divided (faraa'id) for these are part of your religion.'

This command of 'Umar, to learn Arabic and Sharee'ah, combines the things that are needed, for religion involves understanding words and actions. Understanding Arabic is the way to understand the words of Islam, and understanding the Sunnah is the way to understand the actions of Islam…"

(Iqtidaa’ al-Siraat al-Mustaqeem, 2/207)

In addition to the above, we advise the following:

1. Muslims should strive – along with their families and children – to speak Arabic in their homes and gatherings. Parents should set the example for their children within the home, and sometimes they should deliberately not answer their children if they do not speak Arabic.

2. Try to put the children in Arabic schools and academies wherever possible.

3. Families should try to form housing co-ops or live close to one another, so that the neighbourhood and the local environment will be Arabic-speaking.

4. Try to set up Arabic-language courses and seek reward and draw closer to Allaah by doing so. Books, tapes and other modern educational means should be used for this purpose.

5. Continually listening to recordings of the Qur’aan, listening to lessons on tape and attending Islamic lectures in Arabic.

And Allaah is the source of strength. May Allaah bless our Prophet Muhammad,