

ISLAMIC CONVERSATION

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Understand the Islamic etiquette for greetings, including the specific rules of greetings
- Discuss specific rules regarding hand-shaking, hugging and kissing
- Discuss that we should not favour people over others in greetings for the wrong reasons
- Understand that Islam encourages humour in conversation
- Know the limits we have to keep when making jokes
- Discuss the issue of 'pranks'
- Discuss some examples of healthy positive humour

Social Rules

SENIOR LEVEL

Islamic conversation

Allah (SWT) in his infinite wisdom and mercy wishes for us humans to achieve the best we possibly can in this world and in the next. He (SWT) has created us as social gregarious creatures but with that He has also given us guidelines on how to behave with each other. In this lesson we shall discuss some of the guidelines of conversations between ourselves.

ETIQUETTE OF GREETING

Allah (SWT) has placed a great emphasis on greeting people and especially initiating a greeting.

Imam Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali (as) said:

"Seventy rewards is the share of the one who initiates a 'greeting' and only one reward belongs to the one who returns the 'greeting'."ⁱ

When two people see each other, the initiator of the exchange of greetings receives a greater reward. The greeting referred to here is the Islamic Greeting "Assalāmu 'Alaykum" and its reply "Wa 'Alaykum al Salām". Similarly, greeting Non-Muslims with "good morning" or something similar is also recommended.

We must also remember to:

- 1- Be cheerful and smiling when greeting others (not grumpy)
- 2- Greet even our close friends and family (like parents and siblings) as this increases love and respect.
- 3- Make eye contact with the one we are greeting.

- 4- Hugging and shaking hands between members of the same sex or with Maḥram members of the family is also recommended. The Holy Prophet (saw) said:

"When you meet each other then initiate greeting (salām) and embrace; and when you separate from each other, then depart with seeking forgiveness."ⁱⁱⁱ

Some rules regarding greetings

- 1- We are permitted to greet members of the other gender only if there is no risk of sin
- 2- We should not discriminate when greeting (i.e. greeting our friends only not others, or greeting the rich not the poor)
- 3- Those standing must greet those sitting whilst those arriving at a gathering must greet those present
- 4- It is also recommended to ask about the health of others upon greeting them.
- 5- Kissing is permitted between members of the same gender. The following rules should be noted though:
 - a. Never on the lips – Except for between spouses or between parents and their young children
 - b. Not loud or inappropriate
 - c. Not on the hand except for the Ahlul Bayt (as) or the great scholars
 - d. It is recommended to kiss scholars on the forehead
 - e. No one should kiss another person's feet
- 6- Shaking hands is never permitted between members of the opposite gender who are not maḥram to each other (Refer to activity). Circumstances when it is permitted is:
 - a. When it may cause extreme difficulty
 - b. When there is a barrier between the hands (like a glove) – but no squeezing is involved.ⁱⁱⁱ

We have to remember that a greeting is a form of kindness shown to others; it is not permissible to initiate a greeting with an evil intention (such as striking a conversation with a member of the opposite gender, or seeking a ḥarām favour (e.g. obtaining ḥarām objects).

ETIQUETTE OF CONVERSATIONS

Just as with greetings, Allah (SWT) has placed some boundaries as to what is appropriate conversation. It should be remembered though that being a good Muslim does not mean that a person is boring and humourless. Indeed Imam 'Ali (as) says:

"Humour people and you will enjoy their brotherhood. Meet them with smiles and joy and you will kill their spites."^{iv}

Some rules to observe and remember when conversing with others:

- 1- We should never be offensive, make offensive jokes or use sarcasm to destroy the confidence of another. It is ḥarām to tease and laugh at anyone due to their physical nature or circumstance. This type of bullying behaviour is highly frowned upon by Allah (SWT). Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

"O you who believe! Let not (one) people laugh at (another) people perchance they may be better than they, nor let women (laugh) at (other) women, perchance they may be better than they; and do not find fault with your own people nor call one another by nick names." (Surah al-Ḥujurāt 49: 11)
- 2- We should never lie or gossip – Even if it is in joke or a prank. Lying in jest is another kind of falsehood. For instance, telling a person that "such a person has invited you for dinner tonight," when actually there is no truth in it can be harmful if that person believes the lie. This type of falsehood is also ḥarām as proved conclusively from the traditions.^v
- 3- Thinking carefully when we make a statement or state a fact to ensure it is not exaggerated, is true and is not offensive.
- 4- Maintaining the principles of ḥijab when conversing with members of the opposite gender.

- 5- We should avoid constantly telling jokes and clowning around as we will never be taken seriously. Imam al-Sajjād referring to a clown once said:

“Tell him that there is a day for God in which those who indulge in vain and futile acts will not gain anything but loss.”

- 6- We should never violate the sanctity of sad occasions and places like funerals and graveyards with laughing and giggling.
- 7- Have a sense of humour and do not take everything personally!

The Holy Prophet summarised the conversations of a true believer as thus:

”(The true believer is one who possesses) noble interactions (with others); his (spiritual) bosom is the most expansive from all other people; his soul is the most humbled (of others); his laughing is done (only) with smiling (not out loud); and his gathering (with others) is (only) in order to learn something...”^{vi}

Being humorous is also very encouraged in Islam if the rules above are followed. The Holy Prophet used to be very humorous and used to encourage his companions to have a sense of humour too!

One of the Holy Prophets companions was Zahir, who used to trade in metal objects. Once the Prophet was passing by the bazaar, he saw Zahir and playfully grabbed him from behind and said, “*Will anyone buy this slave?*” Zahir laughed and said, “*O Messenger of Allah, whoever buys this slave will be in loss.*” The Prophet smiled and said, “*In Allah’s eyes, your value is high.*”

ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

These rules also cover the online space when chatting or commenting on other people’s status. Online conversations can easily be misinterpreted as

- 1- There is no eye contact or body language
- 2- There is often very little context
- 3- It is impersonal
- 4- It is limited to written word mostly

It is therefore *very* important that sensitive conversations be carried out in person and that whatever is being said online is thought about carefully.

Instant messaging can be a very useful tool for a Muslim to ensure communication with family, friends and teachers. In spite of this, we have to learn to use these tools correctly. Some simple rules for online conversations include:

- Avoid sarcasm.
- Avoid using too many IM Acronyms. Too many ‘LOLs’ might spell insanity, not laughing out loud.
- Do not write your entire daily agenda in your personal message space. The people who really care where you are probably have your mobile phone number anyway.
- If you have to leave an IM conversation, it is nice to say why you are leaving.
- Always say “Goodbye” or “TTYL,” don’t just suddenly sign off your IM client.
- Emotions are okay to use, but don’t overuse them. For example, they cannot replace words, they go together with words. A sad face should be accompanied with why you’re sad.
- If you have really important news to tell somebody, or a long story, use e-mail to write it all out or use the telephone.
- You can have serious talks on IM, but anything really serious should be done face-to-face. IM conversations are more likely to lead to misunderstandings.
- Do not start conversations when you have nothing to say. They end up being dull
- Don’t be “Half there” when having an online conversation- This is rude and inappropriate. Informing the other party that you are doing other things or alternatively postponing the conversation may be more appropriate.

Class Activity

Discuss with your teacher the most appropriate way of avoiding unwanted handshakes from non-maḥram members of the opposite gender.

Review Questions

1) Joking in Islam is

- a. Never permitted
- b. Encouraged as long as it is done appropriately and within Islamic principles
- c. Is only permitted with non-Muslims

2) We are permitted to play pranks on people:

- a. Only if we do not lie or offend the person
- b. Never, it is debasing and offensive
- c. If it will make others laugh

3) In online conversations

- a. We are allowed to talk about others
- b. We are allowed to pretend to be who we are not
- c. We have to be very concise and avoid wasting time

ⁱ Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 78, p. 120

ⁱⁱ Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol. 76, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.al-islam.org/modestdress/6.htm> (section on Shaking hands)

^{iv} Mizan al-Hikma, vol.3 p.240.

^v http://www.al-islam.org/greater_sins_complete/22.htm

^{vi} Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 64, Section of the Signs of a True Believer, pg. 310, tradition 45