

The Present and Future Relationship Between Western Consumerist Television and World Spiritual and Cultural Values: A Muslim View

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Muslims, in general, tend to understand "modernity" in two ways": (1) modernization and (2) Westernization. Modernization, which is widely approved, is equated with the advancement in science and technology, which in turn is associated with im-

proved systems of communication and transportation, health care, public services, etc. Westernization, which is widely disapproved, is equated with the influx of “mass western culture” into non-western societies and is associated with a large number of social problems ranging from promiscuity to latchkey kids, drug and alcohol abuse, breakdown of community/family relations, etc. To what degree it is possible to separate modernization from Westernization is a question which is confronting all contemporary Muslim societies which, whilst they want to attain a better standard of living, wish zealously to preserve what they consider to be “the integrity of the Islamic way of life.”

While television has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the process of modernization, it has also, according to Muslim perception, been a major source of Westernization. Although it has made useful information about many subjects accessible to people across the world, it has also exposed the youth of societies in which a high value is placed on modesty, chastity, fidelity and respect for parents and tradition to a world dominated by materialism and the pleasure-seeking instinct in which the higher values of life seem to be lost.

While I think that Muslim stereotypes of what is western need as much correction and qualification as western stereotypes of what is Islamic, like most Muslims I tend to have mixed feelings about western television, particularly in terms of its impact upon children and young adults.

Though the television of today and the interactive media of tomorrow will give our children access to an incredible amount of information, will this information lead them to becoming what the Islamic mystical tradition calls *Insan al-kamil* or the complete human being? I am reminded of the words of T. S. Eliot who said:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

We are living in an age when high value is put on an “instant” everything—from instant coffee to instant education and spiritual

enlightenment. But the great religions and cultural traditions of the world tell us that the process of attaining maturity, of growing into a season of ripeness and fullness, takes time and a wide variety of experiences. I do not believe that present television or future interactive media can ever take the place of what one experiences when reading a classic, taking a walk through the park or sitting still in an act of meditation.

Since televisions and VCRs took over the living rooms in most countries of the world, children have become less, not more, literate. The precious time that is needed for them to grow internally is consumed by the habit-forming entertainment to which many of them are overexposed. For many people in the Third World, television and VCRs have become a national escape from the harsh realities of life into a fantasy world of glamour, romance and adventure. According to Marx, religion was the opiate of the masses. Today, television may be regarded in a similar way. While there may be a few people who watch television for instruction, the vast majority watch it for entertainment. While entertainment has a place in human life, no great religious or cultural institution makes entertainment its central value.

The emphasis in Islam, as in other prophetic religions, is on living righteously and justly. This involves constant remembrance of God, the merciful and beneficent creator and sustainer of the universe, and service to God's creatures and creation. These objectives require a serious attitude toward life and the ability to reflect deeply and to live a life free from material addictions and distractions. In some way all major religious traditions see a connection between "whole" and "holy." The consumerist orientation of western television is not toward "wholeness" but toward generating what the Buddhist tradition calls "craving" which it sees as the cause of life being "out of joint."

I am afraid that the inner space, which we all need to discover our deepest selves and the meaning of what is ultimate, will become less and less as more and more our outer space is taken over by present or future media agencies. If interactive media of tomorrow is going to be a major means of education, then place must be made for it in our homes and lives, but great care must be exercised to ensure that that which was created to serve us

does not become our master. If television or interactive media consume the time, space and energy which are needed for the most important things of life—such as the preservation of one’s inner well-being or sense of wholeness, or relationship with others and with creation—then they need to be reevaluated and put “in their proper place” within the context of our total life.

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