

By A.B Khan

When a Muslim in a North American university or college for the first time, he or she comes into contact with a community whose culture and lifestyle are diametrically opposed to the Islamic way of life.

The culture of Western universities can only be described as hedonistic, nihilistic and narcissistic. That is to say, many inhibitions are let loose and individual whims and fancies run wild. The freshman year itself begins with orientation, which while supposedly a process of introduction and transition to the university for the first-year student, is an opportunity for most participants to drown themselves (sometimes literally) in alcohol and pursue sexual opportunities.

This sets the stage for the school year. On any given school day, a student can choose to go to class, sleep in and skip the whole day, drink, party, or study, all depending on how he or she feels at that moment. Individual desires become the first priority and everything else takes a back seat.

The uncontested reign of individualism is also reflected in the values promoted by student councils and governments. All lifestyles, especially those furthest from religion, are promoted. Illicit, unlimited sex is seen as something to be sought and a basis for building a macho reputation (as long you can avoid sexually transmitted diseases - for which purpose condoms and condom machines proliferate around campus). Homosexuality is something to be proud of and promoted as a viable alternative. Student campaigns and marches are organized against those who dare to speak out and challenge this value structure; these challengers are regarded as reactionary, undemocratic and of course, religious extremists and fundamentalists. In the university community therefore, the self is god, and everyone loves this god and engages in daily worship, and obeys the laws that this god creates, and everyone adjusts as these laws change on a daily basis.

Into this atmosphere arrives the Muslim, who may or may not be practicing Islam to the best of their ability. The practicing Muslim (and even the not so observant Muslim) knows that Allah is the Creator and that the Qur'an is His Word. And according to that Word, He has **'created death and life, that He may test you which of you is best in deed.'** (al-Mulk: Verse 2) Also, He says, **'And I created not the jinns and humans except to worship Me'** (adh-Dhaariyaat: Verse 56). So the purpose of the Muslim's existence is clear.

The conscious Muslim makes every attempt to, while pursuing his or her studies, increase their knowledge of Qur'an and Sunnah, so that they may better understand and apply the faith. The structure of this Muslim's day is around salat, and this person juggles and adjusts their daily schedule and makes every effort to insure that the five daily salat are performed on time. Similarly, this individual understands the approach of Ramadan and prepares for it, again making the necessary adjustments in order to make sure that they are on top of their studies, that assignments are being handed in, that the best marks are being achieved, all while the requirements of the daily fasts are being met.

For the Muslim, Islam is never an excuse for slacking off, whether in academics or with respect to other responsibilities. As well, the observant Muslim may choose to participate in those clubs, activities and aspects of university life that do not contradict the Qur'an and Sunnah and do not place the Muslim in positions where he or she must compromise the faith. Thus, the conscientious Muslim enters the University atmosphere and struggles constantly to maintain a structured set of priorities. He or she follows Allah's order: **"So strive as in a race in good deeds."** (al-Maaidah: Verse 48) On the other hand, there is also the borderline Muslim, who knows his or her identity but whose consciousness of Islam, due to upbringing or experience, is not terribly strong. This individual is on the 'borderline' because they are pulled one way by

their understanding of Islam and in the opposite direction by the powerful pressures of the university culture. Is it at all surprising that many Muslims who are on the borderline succumb to the pressures of the atmosphere around them and become, at best, part-time Muslims?

At the end, the challenge is great. All Muslims in the university community have to struggle in order to maintain their Islam. Those who are practicing, committed and understand the objective of their existence have further duties. They must invite the borderliners with hikmah and understanding but with firmness as well. And they must inform the university community at large about Islam in the different ways that are available. Yes, of course the challenge is great. But insha' Allah, the reward is much greater.