

Valentine's Day Has Religious Enemies  
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It is difficult to believe that a holiday as seemingly benign as St. Valentine's Day could arouse hatred, but it does. This dubious but nice Catholic holiday commemorates an early saint who provided dowry money to deserving but poor girls. But when romantic love (choosing one's spouse) became the norm in the 18th century Western world, this holiday morphed into one of courtship. Young people sent sweet and often anonymous messages or cards to the object of their affection. This practice has never been without enemies, even in our culture, but today it has suffered the hostility of quite a few countries whose religions and customs forbid choice in marriage.

In 1998, Valentine's day was banned in Hillsborough NJ schools because the holiday was named after St. Valentine and is therefore "religious." They substituted "Special Person Day" for Valentine's Day. This nonsense has since faded and they are once more letting nine-year-olds with crushes send the traditional cards.

In 2000, a coalition of 76 organizations petitioned the FDA to permit morning-after pills to be sold over the counter in pharmacies because of the fear of too much Valentine's Day sexual activity resulting in unplanned pregnancies. This offended those conservative religious groups who oppose abortion.

In 2001, fundamentalist Hindus ordered activists to disrupt Valentine's Day, rampaging against gift shops, burning cards, and disrupting festivities. "Down with Valentine's Day! We will not allow our culture to be polluted. Long live Hindu culture!" they shouted. How dare young people love each other? Marriage is a family affair.

Simultaneously in Malaysia, religious police carried out raids throughout the country. Sixty couples who were found kissing or cuddling were ordered to go for counseling. Altogether, 208 couples were arrested and punished. This time, it was fundamentalist Islam calling the shots.

Valentine's Day has gained popularity in recent years in Pakistan, where Pakistani youths use the symbolic day to exchange cards, chocolates and gifts with their loved ones. But public displays of affection and love are not allowed in the largely conservative society that considers such acts violations of Islam and Pakistani culture.

Now Pakistan, always a model of religious fanaticism, has weighed in to outlaw the celebration of this romantic holiday because it is popular among the secular young. In order to comply with the court ruling, Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) last week sent out instructions to its TV and radio licensees to remind them of the ban.

"Respondents are directed to ensure that nothing about the celebrations of Valentine's Day and its promotion is spread on the Electronic and Print media," PEMRA's directive stated. "No event shall be held on an official level and at any public place. PEMRA is directed to ensure that all the TV channels shall stop the promotion of Valentine's Day forthwith." Religious thugs reinforced this ban.

For a country with such a wretched economy, this seems to be a strange thing to do when more than 60 per cent of the population is under 30, and this popular holiday was responsible for a boost in sales of flowers and candy.

Saleema Hashmi, a Lahore-based artist and renowned educator, expressed her frustration with a system that focuses on "irrelevant issues," rather than making decisions on issues that really impact society and the country.

"Don't our courts have better things to do instead of passing rulings on celebrating a mere romantic day?" she asked. "I do not understand how celebrating or denouncing Valentine's Day can impact our religion, traditions, social or cultural norms."

She added, "If we do not agree that girls and boys can enjoy their right of expressing love, then we need to revisit our thinking patterns and accept the reality."

Unfortunately, there is a commonality among all fundamentalist religions, not just Hinduism or Islam. The hot button issue is women having choices. Women should not be courted, they believe. They should be told what to do and whom to marry by their

menfolk. But these tyrants are like King Canute, trying to hold back the tide (of freedom). They cannot win this one.

677 words

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