

ESSAYS ON FAITH: RAMADAN A TIME FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Muslims all over the world are passing through the month of Ramadan, which is considered to be the most blessed month in the Islamic calendar. It started on the eve of Oct. 4 (Islamic day starts at the sunset). During this month, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. They abstain from food, drink (even water), and conjugal relationships during the days and spend the nights in prayers. The month is filled with festivities and generosity. Parties for fast breaking are common occurrences. The mosques (Muslims' place of worship) are full of people. If you are feeling lonely, all you have to do is to walk into a nearby mosque. You will find a variety of food to break your fast with and plenty of people to socialize with. Families invite relatives and friends to break the fast together. Special care is given to the needy and travelers. After finishing the dinner Muslims rush to mosques to attend recitals from the Holy Quran, Muslims' holy book. The reciters, who have memorized the whole Quran, recite it in a beautiful voice. The experience is spiritually uplifting. After attending the recital, the Muslims call it a day only to get up just before the dawn to catch a small breakfast. After offering the early morning prayer and private Quranic recitation, the normal day routine starts, except that there is no lunch or coffee break.

Although each religion has a unique set of festivities, if we must compare the occasion of Ramadan with Christian festivities, it is Christmas and Lent combined. Just as Christmas is an occasion to commemorate the birth of Christ, fasting is Muslims' way of celebrating the occasion when God the Almighty revealed the Holy Quran. The revelation of the Holy Quran began about 1395 years (1439 lunar years) ago in the month of Ramadan and continued for 23 years. It is a collection of the statements of God the Almighty revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel. It teaches us how we should fashion our life, how can we promote peace and tranquility in our society, and how we can achieve eternal salvation. Ramadan is also the month of thanksgiving for Muslims, thanking God the Almighty for bestowing the Holy Quran to humanity.

Abstaining from food and drink during the day and spending the night in prayer is only the tip of the iceberg. Like the daily obligatory prayers help Muslims avoid bad and indecent things and the obligatory charity purifies their earnings and enhances their love for God the Almighty, fasting helps them learn piety. The Holy Quran states: "O you believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, so that you may learn piety." (2:183) Fasting is thus a prescription to treat deficiency in piety. The Arabic word for piety in the Holy Quran implies "being aware of the presence of God the Almighty." Whatever we do in our daily life, we should do it with the awareness that God the Almighty is watching us, and we have to account for our actions to Him on the Day of Judgment. This attitude makes us question if our actions are right and justified. If an act is wrong and unjustified, this awareness should prevent us from committing that act. During the fasting this awareness attains a higher level. Staying at this higher level of awareness for thirty consecutive days makes it a habit.

Thus, whether we are dealing with our spouses, children, parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers or even strangers, we end up improving our behavior and relationship. Fasting in this

month is thus a prescription for behavior improvement. The month of Ramadan thus provides an occasion for Muslims to improve their behavior. In order to emphasize this aspect of fasting, Prophet Muhammad has made the following statements:

“Whoever does not give up false statements (i.e. telling lies), evil deeds, and speaking bad words to others, God is not in need of his (fasting) leaving his food and drink.” (Bukhari 8.83)

“Fasting is a protection for you, so when you are fasting, do not behave obscenely or foolishly, and if any one argues with you or abuses you, say, ‘I am fasting. I am fasting.’” (Bukhari 3.118, Al-Muwatta 18.57)

A man said, “Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), such and such a woman has a reputation for engaging to a great extent in prayer, fasting and almsgiving, but she annoys her neighbors with her tongue.” He replied, “She will go to Hell.” He said, “Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), such and such a woman has a reputation for engaging to a small extent in fasting, almsgiving and prayer, but she gives pieces of curd in charity and does not annoy her neighbors with her tongue.” He replied, “She will go to Paradise.” (Tirmidhi 4992)

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