

## MUSLIMS, RAMADAN AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

While the spiritual meaning of Passover and Easter which have profound religious significance for Jews and Christians respectively, remained undiminished in the context of the coronavirus pandemic which has ravaged the world, these holy days were not celebrated this year in traditional settings. To spend Passover or Easter without being able to visit one's places of worship and take part in communal rituals and festivities, or even to see many family members and friends, was undoubtedly an acute hardship for many Jews and Christians. But a critical compensating factor was that of knowing that safeguarding the well-being and lives of those who matter to us takes priority over participating in customary practices associated with our faith.

Ramadan which will begin on April 23, 2020, will constitute a real challenge for Muslims in Louisville and other places where mosques have been closed. For several years, during Ramadan a number of local mosques have held *Iftar* (breaking of the fast) for members of the larger community. Those who have attended these gatherings are familiar with Ramadan, but for those who are unfamiliar with this month-long religious observance, I offer a brief overview of what it signifies for Muslims.

The highest source of authority in Islam is the Qur'an which Muslims regard as God's Word revealed to Prophet Muhammad by Archangel Gabriel. The process of revelation which took place incrementally over twenty-three years, began in 609 A.D. during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. *Siyam* or Fasting, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, was instituted in Ramadan to commemorate the beginning of the Qur'anic revelation. The directives regarding Fasting are stated in the Qur'an, Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 183-185, 187). Fasting during Ramadan is obligatory for all Muslims, but those who are sick or traveling may defer it, and those who are unable to fast due to old age or chronic disabilities are exempted but exhorted (if able) to provide food to an indigent person who is fasting.

Fasting is from sunrise to sunset and during this time, no food, drink, or sexual activity is allowed. This long and rigorous religious rite shifts focus from fulfillment of biological instincts or desires to *taqwa* (righteous practice). The exacting exercise of self-discipline during Ramadan is intended to inculcate in Muslims not only greater control over their physical appetites, but also an existential awareness of what it means to experience hunger and thirst. In this way fasting is a great equalizer between the rich and the poor.

Mosques are very important to Muslims as Islam is a highly prayer-centered religion, prescribing five daily prayers. While prayers can be offered at home or at any other place, Muslims generally believe that the Friday afternoon (*Jumu'ah*) congregational prayer is obligatory. In Ramadan, there is an additional congregational prayer (*Taraweeh*) after the

night-prayer. Prior to this many mosques host daily *Iftar* gatherings. Thus, in Ramadan, both the religious and social life of Muslims revolves around the mosque.

The Islamic *ummah* (world-community) was heartsick at the Saudi government's banning of *'umrah* (pilgrimage) in March. Denial of access to the two holiest mosques revered by 1.8 billion Muslims, in Ramadan, will deepen this anguish. The closure of mosques in Louisville will make this Ramadan both very strange and sad for our highly-diverse, local Muslim community. On the eve of Ramadan 2020, I have some thoughts that I would like to share with my sisters and brothers in Islam.

Due to the pandemic all communities of faith have had to find new ways of meeting their spiritual and emotional needs. As a Muslim I turn to the Qur'an to guide me in my search for meaning and strength at a time of unprecedented desolation, gloom and despair. The Qur'an tells me that God is *Rahman* and *Raheem* (Infinitely Merciful and Compassionate) and closer to human beings than their neck-vein. It also tells me that human beings will be tested before they can attain paradise, but those who have *tawakkul* (trust in God) will have a hand-hold that never breaks. The Qur'an tells me repeatedly that God is always with those who face adversity with perseverance and patience.

Prophet Muhammad had told Muslims that the whole earth was a mosque and they could pray wherever they were at the time of prayer. Islam has no church and no pastors. Any Muslim who knows how to pray can be an imam. The primary purpose of Ramadan is to make Muslims conscious of God's presence as *Rabbil-'alameen* (the Creator and Sustainer of all peoples) and of their obligation to take care of those who are vulnerable and in need. The pandemic has given our Muslim community a unique opportunity to fulfil this purpose and live our faith by serving God through serving our neighbors regardless of their belief-system. May the blessings of Ramadan be with all.

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