

RAMADAN IS A TIME OF EMPATHY

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Someone asked me why religion makes so many demands and sets so many rules and regulations? Is it not easier to live without religion, we can do what seems right and not be constrained by such expectations?

I guess the answer is how each of us sees the purpose of this life. If it is the only existence for us - we live - we die, then what transpires here is what matters. We don't need any other standards or measures, if we can aim to live decent and ethical lives with concern for others.

Then there are those of us who, though we may not fully comprehend, still feel intensely the presence of a Power beyond this physical world. We accept that there are higher standards with which we measure our lives.

It is true that like other religions, the Islamic practices do make demands. But I think these are closely linked to what we believe is the purpose of this life, and its place in the journey of the soul.

We believe that the soul is integral to the physical part of us and what we do in this physical world is only one part of the journey. My physical body is not the total of my being.. How we live in this physical, material world is an important phase, but we do continue in another form of life after death. The demands and expectations are to assist us to live well here, and to prepare us for the rest of our passage.

Remembrance of God through prayers is more than just a ritual exercise for the good of this world, charity is more than self aggrandizing, and fasting is more than physical hunger.

As the Quran states:

“The material things which you are given are but the conveniences of this life and the glitter thereof; But that which is with God is better and more enduring: Will you not then be wise?”

Muslims have five practices – belief in one indivisible God; daily specified prayers; charity; the performance of the pilgrimage to Mecca; and fasting in the month of Ramadan.

September 1/08 was the start of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. It is a significant time, as it is during this period that the Prophet Mohammad had his first revelation.

The verses were revealed to the Prophet from 609 CE to his death in 632 CE, over a period of 23 years, and the collection is known as the Quran. The word Quran means recitation, also known as a book of guidance, and is treated with great reverence. The Quran is a constant in the lives of Muslims as verses are recited daily in ritual prayers, and it is read often as the word of God and so a sacred duty.

The first revelation to the Prophet was “Recite/read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created a human out of a germ cell. Recite/ read for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught humans the use of the pen - taught you what you did not know.”

The Quran states that “It was the month of Ramadan in which the Quran was first bestowed from on high as guidance to man, a self – evident proof of that guidance, and as the standard by which to discern the true from the false.” For the month of Ramadan, God asks us to fast for a number of reasons, but most importantly “that you remain conscious of God.”

For us Muslims, this first revelation is powerful. It explains our creation, defines our relationship with God as our Sustainer, and that through God’s bounty and grace we have been given intelligence and reason. The message is that God will provide guidance, but it is up to us as to whether we want to be guided. If we don’t, then the harm is only to us, not to God.

Ramadan allows us to focus on reading the Quran for guidance, practicing self discipline, controlling our anger and negative sentiments, and to think of others by the giving of charity. Physical abstinence of food and drink allows us to experience the pain of hunger, so as to empathize with those who are less fortunate.

Tradition states that the night of the first revelation, called the Night of Power, [Lailat ul Qadr] was near the end of the month of Ramadan. It is considered a night when God is even closer to us, so Muslims pay extra attention to the last three nights.

During Ramadan, charity is heightened as Muslims give a percentage of their wealth in charity, and meals are provided for the poor.

Fasting is prescribed, but as always there is God’s gentle understanding that this may not be possible for all. An alternative is given so that if a person cannot fast, then this is offset by more charity, such as the feeding of the poor. However, praying, meditating and practicing kindness continues.

The month ends in a celebration called Eid ul Fitr when prayers of thanksgiving are offered, new clothes are worn, children are given presents, special foods are prepared, and families and friends get together.

Ramadan Kareem to you! Blessings of Ramadan to you!