



# Ramadan: What Aspect of Humanity Do We Devote Ourselves To?

M. IMAD DAMAJ M. IMAD DAMAJ GUEST COLUMNIST

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"Why are you torturing yourself?" my friend asked when he learned that I am abstaining from food, drink, and other sensual pleasures from dawn to dusk for a whole month. Worse, I am keeping a regular work schedule. In our society, some see such religious practice as excessive or even harmful. My friend was astonished to learn that many Muslims in fact look forward to Ramadan and speak of joy and spiritual anticipation rather than suffering and endurance.

Even many who are not particularly religiously practicing choose to observe Ramadan. Ramadan's fasting from sunrise to sunset, followed by a breaking of the fast, or Iftar, is a precious family time. Many will continue the night journey and go to their local mosque to participate in the communal prayer and recitation of the Quran, which is read in its entirety during this special month.

So my friend looked at me and said: "I guess your people are serious about pursuing their faith. Like they say: No pain, no gain." I was bothered by the "your people" and shot back: "The observance of Ramadan reminds us that our people, all our people in America, are an impressive variety of faiths and creeds, and that America's religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity is one of our nation's greatest strengths." I pushed the envelope and said: "I believe that the observance of Ramadan offers Americans a chance to deepen their understanding of the remarkable traditions of Islam and what they can contribute to our life in America."

He looked at me puzzled and asked, "Contributions to America?"

I reminded my friend that Ramadan is not a novel thing in religious traditions, in particular Christianity and Judaism. Among the aspects common to these religions are that the practice of voluntary deprivation of certain needs such as food and drink for a specific time has a transcending

meaning. Apparently, there is something corrupting about going through a full year without a major break in the way we live, in our habits; a change from conformity helps us to step outside our dream or illusion world. Ramadan comes at different times (because of the lunar calendar in the Islamic traditions) during the year and shatters such routine. The greater the engagement in our daily life, the less aware we become of it. Ramadan is an invitation to walk out of the cave.

RAMADAN helps us in our struggle to see the reality beyond illusion.

Ramadan helps with freeing the prisoner inside ourselves to go outside the cave and observe that God is all around us.

My friend was now getting restless. "You have borrowed this from Plato."

"Look," I said. "Ramadan forces us to confront an essential question: What aspect of our humanity do we devote ourselves to?"

I believe that religion has always wanted to help us remember -- not something new, but what we all know intuitively. Something that most religious traditions strive to teach their followers: In each of us there is this soul, the spiritual other. In the pace of a materialistic and fast life, however, we are prone to silence or ignore that spirit. Ramadan opens the door for this spiritual revival.

Ramadan teaches us that by living this experience of deprivation, of thirst and hunger, we can be in the shoes of millions of people who live in a perpetual state such as this without any breather at the setting of the sun. In Ramadan we learn that hunger is too often a companion and rarely a friend of the poor. Ramadan reminds Muslims that they are divinely given the responsibility of caring for the needs of the less fortunate, as a prerequisite condition for the faith itself.

Right now, our country is living under the false promise of a culture of astonishing reward and instant riches: We want an immediate and material American Dream. America's values of thrift, prudence, and community concern have been hijacked by an all-consuming self-interest. Epidemic rates of obesity, anxiety, depression, and family dysfunction are accepted as the norm. It seems that for most of us, regardless of what we have we want more, and we want it now. More is never enough. We seem on our way to losing control of our own civic fabric. In the Islamic tradition, the human being if left unchecked has a strong tendency for greed.

Shopping is the national "sport." We were told after the 9/11 tragedy that the only sacrifice we had to make was to shop more! We are after houses and cars that we cannot afford and so many new things we really do not need. To compensate, we work harder, we neglect our families, and take on a huge amount of debt. It seems that we have lost our sense of balance between a good life as a goal and profits as means. As the historian George Dyson asked, "Can you have your house and spend it too?" We are failing to have our people strive for balance with their surroundings.

THIS IS WHERE religion with its powerful spiritual messages and prophetic models is reminding us of the danger of this laissez-faire attitude.

To that end, I urged my friend to show a greater humility about Islam and Ramadan. It is one thing to say that we want to learn about Islam, quite another to express an honest keenness to learn from it. In a world where trust is hard to find, Americans routinely overlook fundamental aspects of Islamic traditions that offer insights into who we are and the meaning of our life.

Islam looks at people as fundamentally good and not born with a sin. Human beings according to the Islamic creed are considered as basically forgetful of their place in God's creation and the divine responsibility bestowed on them. This is why daily religious observance and practice are so central to Muslim life.

Ramadan is one of these powerful rituals that remind us that our forgetful nature must be constantly challenged. The current tendency of today to ignore critical and non-politicized aspects of our own religious heritage is something that Ramadan can remind us of in increasingly diverse religious traditions in America.

Go, give it a try and fast for one day, or share a meal with a Muslim neighbor.

Have a happy and blessed Ramadan!

*M. Imad Damaj is the president of the Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs, and serves on the boards of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and Richmond Habitat for Humanity. Contact him at [vmcpa@vmcpa.org](mailto:vmcpa@vmcpa.org)*