

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ramadan: A month of self-restraint

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“The best of deeds in this month [Ramadan] is to restrain oneself from all that Allah, Mighty and Exalted, has prohibited.”

—Prophet Muhammad (S)¹

Over the past few years particularly since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a sharp rise in anti-Islamic fervor in the United States as witnessed by the virulent protests against the construction of Islamic centers in New York and elsewhere.² Alarming and inflammatory anti-Islamic advertisements have appeared on buses in the San Francisco Bay Area, Miami and New York,³ and Terry Jones, a senior pastor of a Gainesville, Florida church had announced a Qur’an burning for 11 September 2010,⁴ which was later postponed to 20 March 2011 as a result of pleas by numerous world officials.⁵

Perhaps most indicative of the level of Islamophobia in the U.S. was the position reversal by the U.S. President on the Park 51 Islamic cultural center, which was to be built near the site of the 9/11 attacks in New York. At first, Obama expressed support for the project. “I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan.”⁶ Then backpedaling the very next day, he equivocated, “I was not commenting, and I will not comment, on the wisdom of making the decision to put the mosque there.”⁷

Even in Denver, Colorado, Islamophobia has shown its vicious, intolerant face with a series of anti-Islamic advertisements on Regional Transportation District buses sponsored by Islamophobe Pamela Geller’s American Freedom Defense Initiative.⁸ Encouraged by winning lawsuits challenging her hate-filled Islamophobic messages that even provoked criticism from the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, Geller exhibited her lack of self-restraint by launching another anti-Islamic offensive; this time she targeted Muslims in the Washington, DC area with an advertising campaign on Metropolitan Area Transit Authority buses.^{9,10}

Commenting on this recent rash of American xenophobia targeting Islam and Muslims, Georgetown University Islamic scholar John Esposito remarked that “suddenly people feel freer to go public with their objections to Muslims.”¹¹ A somewhat more caustic criticism came from Robert Steinbeck, who, writing in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Intelligence Report,” observed, “Rarely has the United States seen a more reckless and bare-knuckled campaign to vilify a distinct class of people and compromise their fundamental civil and human rights than the recent rhetoric against Muslims.”¹²

An example of this bald-faced vilification of Islam and Muslims appeared in a personal Facebook page post by John Jamason, a Public Information Officer with Palm Beach County, Florida, who on September 11, 2013 wrote, “Never forget. There is no such thing as radical Islam. All Islam is radical. ... The Quran is a book that preaches hate.”

When asked later if he should apologize for his detestable remarks, Jamason responded, “No, I don't think I owe anybody an apology, I didn't say anything offensive.”¹³ Jamason's unrestrained repugnant remarks, which are protected as “free speech” under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, did not result in any disciplinary action.¹⁴

Against this backdrop of hatred and intolerance, Muslims in America, along with their coreligionists around the world, are preparing themselves for the rigors of self-restraint needed for the Holy month of Ramadan. The 9th month of the Islamic year, Ramadan (Arabic: رمضان) is the month of fasting that will begin, insha'Allah, either on Saturday, June 28, 2014 (according to the Fiqh Council of North America), Sunday, June 29, 2014, or Monday, June 30, 2014 (by local moon sighting).¹⁵ The first day of the month depends upon whether a Muslim relies on local sighting of the new moon, or upon a religious edict (fatwa, Arabic: فتوى) issued by an Islamic scholar or organization.

Like the five daily prayers, giving charity and pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting (siyam, Arabic: صيام) for the entire month of Ramadan is obligatory for all Muslims regardless of which of the five theological schools (madhab, Arabic: مذهب) within Islam they may follow. The daily fast begins at imsak (Arabic: إمساك), which is about ten minutes before dawn (fajr, Arabic: فجر) and roughly an hour and a half before sunrise (shoruq, Arabic: شروق), and continues until sunset (ghorub, Arabic: غروب) or shortly thereafter. Exact times depend on one's city of residence and school of Islamic theology. A Muslim must make a vow of intention (niyyah, Arabic: نية) to fast, preferably each day before the time of fasting, however some scholars hold that a single vow for the entire month is valid.¹⁶

During the fast, a Muslim must abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, immersing the entire head in water, and marital relations. Also invalidating the fast are deliberately inhaling dense fumes, affirming falsehoods about Allah or the Prophets (AS), intentionally vomiting, or remaining in a state of ritual impurity (janabah, Arabic: جنابة) until dawn.¹⁷ The prohibited acts from which those fasting must restrain are called Muftirat (Arabic: مفطيرات).¹⁸

The daily fast concludes after sunset with a meal known as Iftar (Arabic: افطار) that traditionally begins with 3 dates and water. Then after prayers, a festive meal is eaten, which features such foods as Haleem (wheat and meat porridge with honey and cinnamon), Sholleh Zard (saffron rice pudding with almonds), Mast va Khiyar (cucumbers in yogurt with walnuts and raisins) or Adas bil Hamod (lentil soup with lemon). Foods customarily eaten at Iftar vary from country to country and culture to culture, which make up the warp and woof woven into the rich tapestry of Islam.

After Iftar with friends and family, and nightly prayers, Muslims catch a few hours of sleep then awaken to eat Sohur (Arabic: سحور), a pre-dawn meal for sustenance through the day's long fast. During Ramadan, it is not unusual for Muslims to become a bit listless from lack of food, water and sleep, so in Muslim-majority countries, work hours are often shortened to compensate for the rigors of the Ramadan fast.¹⁹

Minor differences exist among the five theological schools of Islam over such issues as fasting while traveling,²⁰ or where supererogatory prayers are offered. For example among Shi'a Muslims, traveling from one's residence before noon a distance of least eight farasikh (about 27 1/2 miles according to most scholars, Arabic: فراسخ) requires the traveler to break the fast and to make up for it later.²¹ For Sunni Muslims, if a trip begins after dawn, then fasting remains valid.²² Sunni Muslims offer Taraweeh (Arabic: تراويح) prayers in the mosque, while Shi'a Muslims offer Nafla (Arabic: نفلة) prayers at home.²³

The word "Ramadan" is transliterated from the Arabic word رمضان, which contains the Arabic letter ض "dhaad" whose sound is unique to Arabic and does not exist in English or any other language. In fact, Arabic is often referred to as the Language of Dhaad.²⁴ The letter can be rendered as d, z, dh or th to more closely mimic the sound. "Ramazan" is often seen in translations of Persian works, as is "Ramadhan" or "Ramathan."

Fasting the month of Ramadan is commanded by the Qur'an 2:183: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may learn self-restraint."²⁵ Verse 185 clarifies that the month of Ramadan is intended: "The month of Ramadan that in which the Qur'an was sent down as a guidance for mankind." In their Quranic commentary, Agha Pooya and Ahmed Ali explain that "The main object of the Islamic fast is to purify the conduct and character and get the soul charged with divine attributes of God in the practical life for one complete month."²⁶

Scientists have also learned that restraining oneself by fasting has the side benefits of reducing the risk of cancer and the onset of geriatric diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and dementia.²⁷ Studies in peer-reviewed journals have even indicated that fasting may be an effective treatment for rheumatoid arthritis,²⁸ help reduce epileptic seizures,²⁹ and lower the risk of coronary artery disease.³⁰ And fasting is, of course, not unique to Islam, as it is practiced in almost every religion. Among Hindus, fasting is done for penance or for spiritual strengthening;³¹ the Sabians, the oldest of the Chaldean religions, also prescribed fasting for an entire month.³²

In Judaism, fasting is prescribed on Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement, as well as on other days of the year. Fasting on Yom Kippur is commanded in Leviticus 16:29: "On the 10th day of the 7th month you must fast."³³ And again in Leviticus 23:27-32: "Also, on the 10th day of this 7th month there shall be a day of atonement. It will be a holy gathering to you; you shall afflict your souls."³⁴ The prohibited acts for Yom Kippur are remarkably similar to those for Ramadan and include eating, drinking, washing or anointing the body, wearing leather shoes and marital relations.³⁵

In Christianity, Jesus (AS) instructs his followers on fasting as described in the following excerpts from the New Testament, Matthew 6:16-17: "So too when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites: they make their faces unsightly so that everybody may see that they are fasting. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that no one sees that you are fasting."³⁶

Imam Ali (AS) enjoined us to self-restraint, advising, “Gain control of your selves through constant self-struggle.”³⁷ In hopes that our self-restraint during this month of Ramadan will strengthen our Islam, and lead to increased mutual respect and tolerance among all faiths, I would like to wish all Muslims everywhere: Ramadan Mubarak!

رمضان مبارك!

Endnotes

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- ¹² Robert Steinbeck, “Jihad Against Islam,” *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center 142 (2011), accessed 18 May 2014, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2011/summer/jihad-against-islam>.
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