

RAMADAN CELEBRATES A GREAT GIFT FROM GOD

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Mecca was in the early 7th century of common era a small settlement midpoint between the trade route from China and India in the East to the Western world. Mecca is believed to be a township which was established by Ishmael, son of Abraham, (peace be upon them) around the spring of Zamzam in the middle of a small valley surrounded with steep, rugged hills of a desert.

Ishmael and his descendants followed the monotheistic religion of Abraham. Several generations after him, people of Mecca had lost the original religion and fell into idolatry. It is reported that the holy sanctuary of Kaba which was built by Abraham and Ishmael for the worship of one God, now housed over three hundred idols by the 6th and 7th centuries, each representing a tribe in the Arabian Peninsula. It had become a center of pilgrimage. The tribe of Koraish were the custodians of this center. Muhammad, son of Abdullah, belonged to this tribe. He was unhappy with the spiritual condition of his people. He used to go into retreat, leaving his family, and spent days in a cave of a mountain three miles from Mecca. He used to meditate and contemplate and seek the answers to his spiritual inquiry.

In the month of Ramadan in the year of 610 of the common era, Muhammad, (peace be upon him) experienced the first revelation and saw the angel which left him with great bewilderment and awe. He soon came down from the mountain and went to his wife. He was shaking and trembling with fear and a sense of responsibility. She reassured him that he was a benevolent and honest man and God would help him. She then consulted her cousin Waraqa, who had years earlier converted to Christianity and had learned the Torah and the Gospel. When he heard of this experience, he declared that the great Nomus or divine Lord had come to Muhammad through the same angel that had spoken to Moses. Tradition has it that this angel was Gabriel who also is mentioned in the New Testament, Luke 1:26.

In this first revelation, Muhammad was made to recite a part of the following verse:

"Recite,
in the name of your Lord
who created:
who created humankind
from a clot of blood.

Recite,
for your Lord is most generous,
who taught humankind
what it did not know.

Oh, no!

Humankind does indeed go too far
in regarding itself as self-sufficient:
in fact the return is to your Lord."

(from The Essential Koran as interpreted by Thomas Cleary, published by Harper.)

Muhammad, peace be upon him, received the divine guidance over a period of 23 years until he died.

This consisted of over 6,000 verses which are divided into 114 chapters. During the lifetime of the messenger himself, the followers memorized each and every verse and preserved them. It was later compiled into a book form.

Muslims believe that this is the continuation of the guidance found in the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospels, which God had promised when he sent Adam to this earth.

We also believe that this is the culmination of such guidance as it is preserved to this day. Non-Muslim scholars and Muslim scholars agree that what was proclaimed by Muhammad, peace be upon him, is intact and the same, after 1,400 years.

For Muslims, Ramadan is a month of celebration for this great gift of God. Muslims fast during the day and during the night they stand up to listen to the beautiful recitation of the Koran by cantors. When it is recited in a proper fashion it brings tears to Muslim listeners. This is considered a living miracle of God. The Koran also cannot be translated and any translation is considered an interpretation of the scripture.

A special consideration is given to the night between 26th and 27th of Ramadan. Muslims believe this is the night of power. We believe that the Koran first descended on this night and each year on this night the doors are open for special favors from God. During this night, Muslims all over the world stay awake worshipping and praying with the hope that a glimmer of His glory may touch their hearts.

For more information, please refer to a biography of Muhammad by Karen Armstrong, published by Harper Collins.

Al-Hindi is a free-lance writer based in Mercer County.

In last Sunday's column, an editor incorrectly stated the fasting times.

The fast starts an hour and a half before sunrise and ends at sunset.

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