

ESSAYS ON FAITH: RAMADAN A TIME FOR GROWTH

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OVER a billion Muslims all over the world are celebrating Ramadan, a month of fasting, praying and charity. This year it falls between December 30, 1997, and the last part of January. At the end of the month, depending on the new moon sighting, a great feast is celebrated, which this year will be on January 29.

All adult Muslims are obligated to fast from 90 minutes before sunrise to sunset. This fast is to abstain from food, drink and sexual intimacy. This is also a time for spiritual growth and building of good character. Spending in charity during this period is encouraged more than any other time. Along with refraining from food and drink, one has to conduct day-to-day business without lying, cheating and backbiting. Most Muslims try to perform all five obligated prayers in time and extra prayers are held each night in congregations in which the Koran is recited.

The Koran is the holy book of Muslims, and it was revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him). The very first portion of the Koran was revealed one night in Ramadan in 610 A.D. This message was brought by the angel Gabriel and Muhammad (peace be upon him) was made to recite it, memorize and proclaim to humanity the message of Allah. (Allah is the specific and proper name of God in Arabic.)

The first revelation was recorded:

*Proclaim. In the name of your Lord who created:
Who created humankind from a germ cell
Read - for thy sustainer is the most beautiful one.
Who has taught [man] the use of the pen
Taught man what he did not know.*

Here it alludes to the special favor God has given to humans - the ability to use the pen, or writing to transmit the knowledge from one generation to another. He also gave humans knowledge which other creations do not have.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) received more than 6,300 verses over a period of 23 years which were recited, memorized and recorded in writing immediately.

God has guided humanity by sending His messages and books through His chosen people. Some of these books and the Messengers are mentioned in the Koran. Lengthy narrations about the missions of Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus (peace be upon them) is present in the Koran. Their scriptures are mentioned as the Scrolls, the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel.

According to the teachings of Islam, the final message is the Koran and God has addressed humanity as a whole, and it is not just for a specific people or time. God has promised its preservation until the end of our time. For the last 1400 years, the Koran has been preserved as it was revealed in the beginning. No change in words and verses has been made. A copy of the Koran of the earliest time is the same as today. There are several sects and subjects among Muslims, but the Koran is the same for all.

Today, most Muslims learn at least a few chapters of the Koran by heart. These are recited in the five daily obligatory prayers. Some men and women in each community even memorize the whole Koran. These people are honored and respected in the community. Each adult is encouraged to recite the whole Koran during the month of Ramadan.

Here is a brief outline of the message of the Koran:

- There is only one God and He is the creator of everything.
- God has placed humans on Earth as vicegerent (God's full representatives).
- God has given us limited free will. This distinguishes us from the other creations.

God has placed a conscience in us which guides us to choose good instead of evil. God has also sent guidance through His Messengers to every nation. Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said that before him 124,000 Messengers of God have been sent in various times and places. Muslims are required to respect all the Messengers and holy books of God.

This life is a fraction of our existence and the rewards will depend on our conduct toward God and His other creations. God is most merciful, and we have to depend on His Grace on the Day of Judgment.

God forgives most sins against Him, but the wrongs we commit against our fellow beings have to be forgiven by them first.

Hindi is a free-lance writer who lives in Bluefield. He referred to "The Meaning of the Holy Quran" (Koran) by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and "The Essential Koran" by Thomas Cleary to write this article.

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