



Ramadan Reflection - Week 1, 2022

My experience of Ramadan now reaches back more than twenty years – to 2001 when I living with Franciscan friars in Egypt, and serving at a small clinic outside of Cairo where I ministered to people afflicted with leprosy. After a busy morning of cleaning wounds and bandaging hands and feet, my Muslim coworkers and I would take a break, drinking tea and eating freshly baked break. But that all changed with the coming of Ramadan when Muslims abstain from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset.

At first, I continued to observe my tea break – alone, in another room out of consideration for my coworkers. But break time was a chance for us to relax together and even laugh amid the sickness and suffering around us. It didn't make sense for me to take a break alone, and so within a few days I began to fast with them. Before long I was invited to stay at the clinic overnight to break the fast at the end of the day and spend much of the night in feasting and friendship.

It's no wonder that Muslims welcome Ramadan. It's a joyous time in spite of the rigors of fasting – which can be considerable during the longer days of summer. Strands of colored lights are stretched across streets and special lanterns (*fanoos*) are hung overhead and outside homes and businesses. Strangers will greet one another on the street with: *Ramadan Mubarak!* (“a blessed Ramadan”) or: *Ramadan Kareem!* (“a generous Ramadan”). Entire city streets will be transformed into block-long tables so that friends, neighbors and perfect strangers can join in one great feast provided through the generosity of businesses and individuals.

But Ramadan is much more than fasting and feasting with family and friends. As I experience it, Ramadan is – to borrow a computer term – about *rebooting* one's spiritual life. Fasting *resets* our bodies with less sleep at night and no nutrition during the day so that we can *refocus* on the source of all life – *Allah* (God). In short, Ramadan is about *repentance* – a turning to *Allah* in a more intentional and intensive way. In the Qur'an, *Allah* frequently calls humanity to turn away from sin and turn to Him: “O you who believe, **turn** to Allah with sincere repentance” (*al-Tahrīm* 66.8).

The word used here for “turn” is *tūb*, a linguistic relative of the word *shūv* used frequently by prophets of the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah: “**Turn** to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Is. 45.22). Although the New Testament was written in Greek, John the Baptist and Jesus (the prophets *Yahya* and *'Isa* of the Qur'an) would have used the Aramaic form: *tūv* – “(Jesus) said, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. **Repent** (‘turn’) and believe the gospel!” (Mark 1.15).

Although Ramadan is a distinctly Islamic observance, the fasting, prayer and almsgiving of Ramadan can serve as reminder to people of all faiths of our common need to “reboot” our relationship with God – and with one another.

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