

Ramadan and Eid - the whole year

ATLE HETLAND
EN ROUTE

You may recall the story about the old German woman who was so busy with her Christmas preparations she couldn't think of much else. She was buying and making gifts, delivering cards, baking cakes, and so on. She was doing all the things that women are so good at to ensure that holiday season becomes great for all.

But then, unfortunately, one late afternoon, she was probably getting tired and she slipped on the ice and fell, not only on her soft behind, which might not have been so bad, but she hit her head too. And after that, the old woman, Mrs. Vielgeschrei, thought it was Christmas always, every day, the whole year.

Tomorrow or the day after, the holy month of Ramadan comes to an end. All Muslims, and I hope, Christians and Hindus and other believers, too, will celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr. For a whole month, women have been busy preparing Iftar and Sehr and indeed making everything ready for Eid, yes, often spending money earned by men for the whole family.

But then, I thought, what if we had Ramadan and Eid every day, the whole year around? What if we became like the old German woman, not wanting to let go of the Christmas spirit? What would then be different in our world?

First, nobody can avoid seeing that every Muslim is more considerate and caring during Ramadan. People are more humble and reflective, compassionate and kind, asking for forgiveness and mercy from God and fellow human beings, and seeking the Almighty's advice to love and do what is right. The fast is more an outward symbol of the believers in the Muslim tradition obeying God's law. It is not the most important part of Ramadan, and many cannot observe the fast for health reasons or otherwise. They may still live as much in the spirit of Ramadan as the rest do. Incidentally, in the Christian Church, few denominations observe the old tradition of fasting any more, but the church calendar uses the term for the period before Easter, with reference to Jesus' forty days of fast in the desert.

When I first came to a Muslim country during Ramadan, it was Pakistan. I grew up in Norway, and overwhelmingly Christian and quite secular country, but I had lived in some countries in East Africa where Islam is as important as Christianity, such as in Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania and in Nairobi in Kenya.

I felt quite comfortable about Islam and Ramadan – and also Diwali, the Hindu and Sikh festival of lights, focusing on enhancing the awareness of purity and the inner light in all human beings, the spiritual concept of the *victory of good over evil*, which is so central in most religions.

And obviously, I knew well the Christian feasts of Christmas and Easter as they were focal points of my upbringing and schooling in Norway, where Christianity was the country's state religion until last year, and where more or less every primary school day began and ended with the Lord's Prayer.

Today, with a large number of immigrants in Norway, and pupils belonging to other religions than Christianity, or no religion, there is openness to them as well. Yet, in the school subject called 'religious studies', Christianity is still the most important religion. But that also makes every child and citizen knowledgeable about one main religion. Here, there are lessons that can be learnt for Muslim

countries, where there is often scant knowledge about the religion, although people are very religious. It is essential that religious studies are in the mother tongue. In the Protestant tradition in Christianity, Latin was abolished as the main religious language more than 400 years ago, and the mother tongue has since been used. It strengthened and democratized the role of religion in society. Ritual and symbolism became less important, while the individual's responsibility for own belief and actions increased.

Let me also tell you that I lived in USA for some years, a land where religion, usually Christianity but also other religions, play a visible role in people's daily lives, more than seems to be the case in Europe. The period from Thanksgiving (the last Thursday of November) up to Christmas on 25 December is a season with a number of similarities to Ramadan. In the church calendar, this period is termed *advent*, the waiting-time before Christmas and the birth of Jesus, symbolizing a new era.

All religious feasts remind the human beings of aspects of God, of spirituality, of humility and that we should seek strength and advice from a power above and beyond ourselves. We learn about God, we try to gain wisdom and understanding of him/her and about our life and the world, and we try to be prepared for the life hereafter. Above all, religions teach us to become better human beings – better representatives of God.

These are also central aspects of the true meaning of Ramadan.

And then, how should we live our lives in practice in the spirit of Ramadan and Eid the rest of the year? How should it be manifested through our daily actions? How can we become better human beings, which is what we all yearn for, so that we can do what is good and right in the eyes of God and fellow human beings?

Since we believe that God is one and that he/she is a *universal force for good*, we must also believe that *all human beings are equal*, that is, each of us is of the same value and importance in God's eyes.

We should go beyond our religion, or religions, within our country. We should go beyond borders to include other countries with other religious traditions. We should work for peace at home and abroad. Obviously, if we are rich or poor, successful in our careers in life, has no merit at all. To do right and good and live in the spirit of Ramadan and Eid is at a different level.

It is our duty to tell what we believe is right, yet, it is also our duty to listen to others and help them in their religious search and daily lives. To *tolerate* someone else's belief is just the beginning. We must also *respect and appreciate diversity*, because it will enrich us all.

We must look at others within our community and country with tolerance, respect and appreciation, irrespective of differences, such as, class, language, gender, and other things.

To appreciate and encourage everyone to do what they think is best for themselves and others, is what we should do. To accept each other the way we are, with our excellence and the opposite, is what we should do. It is what God' wants us to do.

And then, at the end, when life's journey is over, let us hope we can say: *I tried my best, with God's help*. That was all I could do. I tried to be like the old German woman who fell on the ice. I tried to make the whole year be like Ramadan and Eid. That was all I did. Was it enough?

Dear reader, I wish you *Eid Mubarak* – this week-end and every day and week!

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.