



MSA

Muslim Students
Association
@Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701

Link

Islamic Center of Athens, 13 Stewart Street, Athens, Ohio 45701 - (740) 594-3890

No. 5.....October 2004

A Monthly Educational Newsletter from Islamic Perspective

OU Student's Journey to Islam

I am an American convert to Islam, one of thousands each year. I probably do not fit anyone's stereotypes of who a convert to Islam should be: None of my family are Muslim nor are any of them from the Middle East. I am a white female, a college student, a Muslim who believes strongly in the rights and equality of women.

In a little over a month, I will mark the first anniversary of my conversion to Islam. This seems a good time to reflect on the journey that led me to this faith.

About three years ago, I gradually left Christianity because of theological differences, which had become more pronounced over time. I had abandoned the Church, but still kept my faith in God. During this transitional time, I studied different religions – Buddhism and Hinduism most deeply – but did not find any that fit with my few existing beliefs and that I could rationally accept.

Around the time that the United States attacked Iraq, I realized that I knew very little about Islam. It was only natural that I would add Islam to the religions I had been reading about. I realized that the way Islam was being portrayed in the media was probably not wholly accurate, so I read Islamic websites and sought out an opportunity to visit the Islamic Center on campus in an attempt to balance my understanding. I attended an Open House at the Islamic Center, spoke with some of the women there, and left more intrigued by this faith than before.

But then I became caught up in the demands of school and life, and put Islam out of my mind for a while. Even so, my spiritual restlessness continued to grow. Just before the month of Ramadan began last year, I decided to visit the Islamic Center again. (The month of Ramadan is a time when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset to commemorate the giving of the Qur'an. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of the Islamic faith.) Ramadan is the most social time of year for Muslim families, since many Muslims come together at their mosques or Islamic Centers to break their fast and pray together each evening.

Ramadan in Athens is no different. I enjoyed the evening meals at the Islamic Center, which was crowded every evening I was able to attend. I even attempted fasting for a week or so,

but found it too difficult to sustain without previous practice with this level of fasting and without the proper religious reason to support my weak willpower. The time I did fast was rewarding, though; I gained deeper insight into what it might be like to be a Muslim and I learned more about the observance of Ramadan than I think I could have from a book or website.

What I most enjoyed about Ramadan was the camaraderie. There were Muslims there from all over the world, representing diverse cultures and having differing interpretations of Islam, covering the spectrum from very conservative to progressive and everything in between, yet they did not allow their doctrinal differences to come between them. Each considered the others to be her sisters and brothers in Islam, regardless of practical differences. I had read that Islam is a religion with room for wide differences of interpretation, that accepts differences of belief within the boundaries of belief in one God and in the final prophet Muhammed. During Ramadan, I saw that diversity in action.

Toward the end of Ramadan, I began seriously considering Islam as possibly being the faith I had been searching for. I was drawn to Islam because of its strict monotheism, its view of other monotheistic religions, and the warm fellowship among its community of believers. Islam recognizes the Jewish prophets as messengers from God in the same prophetic lineage as the last prophet, Muhammed. Islam also recognizes Jesus as a prophet in this line, a very special prophet who will return to usher in the end of time, although he is not the son of God nor God Himself. The Qur'an teaches that prophets were sent to each group or community of people so that all would know the fundamental message that there is only one God, although that message was often misunderstood or forgotten in the course of time. This teaching was one that I had been looking for in particular – the idea that God had not chosen one group of people and left the others to figure things out for themselves, but rather, that God had spoken to all peoples because all are equally worthy of His attention and equally responsible to believe in and worship Him.

(I use the masculine pronoun to refer to God as a linguistic convention, because of the limitations of English. In Arabic, the noun "Allah" – which simply means "God" – does not have a specific gender attached to it. God, or Allah, is neither male nor female, but is far greater than these human classifications.)

When I realized that I was thinking seriously about converting, I wrestled with my feelings toward Islam. One part of me very much wanted to commit to Islam, another part worried that I hadn't found 'the truth' yet, another part was afraid of how my family and my husband might react, and another part was overwhelmed by how much I would have to learn to be a good Muslim. But I knew that I wouldn't be happy if I walked away from Islam. My husband, and most of my family, had always been supportive of me and I had no reason to doubt that would change with my change of faith. And learning about one's faith, whatever it is, is a gradual process – the Muslim community would be there to help me learn, without pressure to learn everything all at once. My desire to become a Muslim overrode my objections, and I made my profession of faith at Eid, the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan.

In the year since my conversion, I've learned more about my faith than I would have thought I could. I've found that the rituals of ablution and prayer are simple to perform but deep with meaning and spiritual value. Sometimes the requirements of my faith are challenging – for instance, it can be difficult on a busy day to pray when I should – but when I put forth the effort to fulfill those responsibilities, I find the effort rewarding. My husband has noticed that I am happier and more content since I accepted Islam. I am glad to be a Muslim, and will enjoy celebrating my first 'conversion anniversary' at Eid this year.

By: Heather Irwin
Graduate Student in Communication and Development Studies

Hadith¹ of this Month

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: *"Fasting is a shield. When any one of you is fasting on a day, he should neither indulge in obscene language, nor raise the voice; or if anyone reviles him or tries to quarrel with him he shouldn't reply to him but say: I am fasting. By Him, in Whose Hand is the life of Muhammad, the breath of the observer of fast is sweeter to Allah on the Day of judgment than the fragrance of musk. The one who fasts has two (occasions) of joy, one when he breaks the fast, he is glad with the breaking of (the fast) and one when he meets his Lord, he is glad with his fast."*

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Every action which is done with the awareness that it fulfills the will of God is considered an act of worship in Islam. Nevertheless, the specific acts of worship, termed the pillars of Islam, provide the framework of spiritual life.

The 'Five Pillars' of Islam are the foundation of Muslim life:

- 1- Testimony of Faith.
- 2- Establishment of the daily prayers.
- 3- Fasting the Month of Ramadan.
- 4- Zakat (Obligatory Charity).
- 5- The pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.

This month, we discuss fasting and its spiritual value.

Fasting

Every year in the month of Ramadan (9th month of the lunar year), all Muslims fast from dawn until sunset, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations with their spouses. Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are menstruating, pregnant or nursing, are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year if they are healthy and able. Children begin to fast (and to observe prayers) from puberty, although many start earlier.

Although fasting is beneficial to health, it is mainly a method of self-purification and self-restraint. By cutting oneself off from worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person gains true sympathy with those who go hungry as well as growth in one's spiritual life. God states in the Qur'an: **"O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may safeguard your selves against moral and spiritual ills."** Qur'an 2:183

This year the month of Ramadan starts around the 15th of October.

Next Month: Zakat

Bernard Shaw said:

If a man like Muhamed were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, he would succeed in solving its problems that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness

From his book that is named "Muhammad"
Bernard Shaw 1817-1902

(1) Hadith is anything Prophet Muhammad said.

Ramadan: A Time of Change

(O You who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you that you may safeguard your selves against moral and spiritual ills.) Qur'an 2:183

One of the things that I like about my faith is that there's always a reason why things should be done according to the Islamic legislations, and that's why the Qur'an said this about Ramadan **"that you may safeguard your selves against moral and spiritual ills"**.

So, there must be benefits for fasting the days of Ramadan. And I'm not going to talk about the physical benefits of fasting, I'll leave it to the Doctors who have studied that and proved the importance of fasting.

There is no way I can explain the spiritual benefits of fasting during the month of Ramadan in one article; we would need to write books to do so. But I'll try my best to point out a few of them.

Ramadan is an intensive course on keeping the truth in mind, getting the power to control yourself, and freeing yourself from anything that you might be a slave to.

It's the month of believing in the truth, sticking to it, and calling for it.

While fasting, a Muslim will remember that he's just a human being, who's so much in need for food and water to survive, that he's powerless no matter how strong he would appear. This should remind him of the most important truth: his servitude to Allah, the One who created and formed him and gave him what he needs to survive. Once we forget this fact, nothing will prevent us from being destructive, and we would even shed the blood of nations without any heartache.

During Ramadan; Kings, Presidents, Leaders and anyone enjoying any type of power would remember that he's just as weak as everybody else, and he's in need for Allah's sustenance all the time. Ramadan would also bring them face to face with the realities of life and suffering of so many throughout

the year.

By getting hungry together and break fasting together at the same time, Ramadan teaches Muslims to care about each other, and feel whatever is going on with other Muslims. They'll be happy for others happiness and sad for others sadness.

One of the things I like about Ramadan is that we practice striving and struggling against ourselves to purify us from evil habits, and save ourselves from sinking into desires.

To make this clear, let me explain what the human self is, and to make this even clearer, let me step back and take a wider look on Man.

Allah had created man with two tendencies, the tendency to do good and the tendency to do evil, and guided him about both. And as there's a Satan whispering to him trying to push him into the road of destruction, there's an angel whispering to him trying to push him into the road of construction.

But the real problem is not in Satan, even though he's a big problem. The real problem is in the human self. If we liked anything and got used to it, we would cling to it as the baby does when he wants something. If this thing is good, it's not a problem, but if it's bad then man needs a great will to restrain himself from doing that. And this is where people tend to be lazy and put forth no effort. Not to mention that the human self is a good ground for the growing of bad feelings like arrogance, envy, jealousy, anger, hatred and many other feelings. Taking these feelings out of your heart requires a great will too.

Here is the importance of Ramadan; it's really an intensive course on striving against your self, and controlling your desires. Ramadan let's you strive against lawful desires like eating, drinking water and marital sex so you would get the ability to strive against unlawful things. Ramadan let's you develop that will that you will need to do so.

Ramadan also makes you a patient and determined person, which are important things in a human's life in striving against his own self and in handling problems that will face him.

This leads me up to one of the great benefits of Ramadan, which is the freedom we have. If somebody is following his desires without controlling them, he would be a slave of his desires. Whoever can't stop himself from drinking alcohol is a slave of alcohol. Whoever can't stop himself from unlawful sex is a slave of his desire, and whoever can't stop himself from considering money to be his goal in life is a slave of money. And whoever controls himself and his pleasures, then he's the free Man. Freedom is not being able to do anything, freedom is when you have the will to say yes or no.

Animals are the ones that follow their desires without restrictions and limitations, and Man is not an animal. Man was given a mind and feelings and so he received

noble goals in his life.

Ramadan gives Muslims the freedom to say no to certain things even though their selves might ask for them.

This is the ultimate servitude to Allah, which is the highest freedom we could achieve.

This is the guard that the verse is talking about, and this is what Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) meant when he said: "*Fasting is a shield*".

Ramadan offers all these things and more to the Muslim, but not every Muslim would receive all these benefits, because it's a matter of how much effort the Muslim would do to receive them.

By: Nadim Ayche

Edited by: Kate Isham

Book Review: American Muslims

American Muslims, by Asma Gull Hasan, is an easy to read introductory book on Islam in America. It is intended primarily for non-Muslims who are curious about Islam, and would be appropriate for readers as young as junior high age.

This book uses an informal style to convey the author's experience of being an American Muslim of Pakistani heritage. Hasan draws heavily on anecdotal experiences from her own life and from the lives of other Muslims, particularly the experiences of women. She distinguishes between cultural traditions and the tenets of Islam, and raises questions about the future of practices such as gender segregation and the prohibition of dating in American Muslim life. Hasan also discusses the impact of stereotypes of Islam in media and the effects of terrorist activities – not all of which were committed in the name of Islam – on America's treatment and perception of Islam within her borders. This book was published in 2000, so the September 11th attacks are not dealt with here.

Although the book is meant as a portrait (or perhaps collage) of the American Muslim experience, Hasan's point of view sometimes overshadows the larger picture. In one example, she argues strongly against wearing hijab (a Muslim woman's headscarf). However, while Hasan does include comments supporting the hijab, Hasan does not give equal space or credit to this point of view which is different from her own, a point of view which, by her own admission, she does not understand.

Despite Hasan's lapses in balanced reporting, American Muslims is an informative, useful and inter-

esting book. It does assume a reader's familiarity with the basics of Islam, but a reader that does not have this familiarity would probably have few problems following the narrative. The book is available at Alden Library.

By: Heather Irwin

MSA Link is published by the
Muslim Students Association of Ohio University.

<http://www.ohiou.edu/~muslimst>

Questions or feedback to: muslimst@ohio.edu

To be added to our mailing list to receive this
newsletter, send an e-mail to the above address.

Islamic Center of Athens
13 Stewart Street
Athens, Ohio 45701
(740) 594-3890