

HUFFPOST RELIGION

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Ramadan and the Blending of American Muslims



By Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf

Iftar is not a ceremony that many Americans know about.

Among Muslims, it is a meal that comes after sundown during the holy month of Ramadan to break the fast that Muslims endure each day from first light.

Ramadan marks the foundation of Islam when friends and families come together in contemplation and fasting and to renew their commitment to community, family and charity.

A month of fasting during daylight hours creates intense psychological and physical effects that tend to slow down one's metabolic functions, quieting the machinery of life, giving one time to think more and react less.

In this time of turmoil in the Muslim world, it should give us all time to reflect on what God calls us to do.

The Iftar I celebrated Saturday night in New York City was an event co-organized by the Cordoba Initiative and the American Egyptian Youth Network, an organization that promotes intercultural community between American and Egyptian youth.

Two things were important about it.

First, it attracted Muslim immigrants from countries as diverse as Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia. And second, members of other faith groups - Christian and Jewish - joined in, including young Egyptian Coptic Christians, whose faith has been persecuted back home.

We celebrated the significance of Ramadan and talked about how to forge an American Muslim identity in the United States. And we talked about how Muslims are following the same immigrant journey that so many faiths have experienced as they adapted to their new homeland.

Muslims have become a significant group in the United States. More than seven million strong, many have left behind homelands in turmoil of sectarian fighting. They have come to a country where the differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims don't lead to violence. Now they will become Americans, leaving behind much of their traditional culture.

That's why it is so important to have Jews and Christians as part of the Iftar mix. They can tell Muslims that what we are going through is not new. Their forbearers experienced the same thing.

A rabbi told me that just 70 years ago there were German synagogues, Polish synagogues, Hungarian synagogues. A priest told me about Irish Catholic churches, Polish Catholic churches, Italian Catholic churches.

If a German Jewish boy wanted to marry a Polish Jewish girl, it was as big of a deal as if people of two different faiths wanted to marry.

But now those ethnicities have blended. And in just the same way, we Muslims will create a new American identity that allows us to live in peace with each other and with other faith communities.

We cannot take an Egyptian Islamic culture and fit it into the American culture. Instead, we have to be able to wrap our heads around aspects of our faith that are beyond national culture and then inject it into the American culture in a way that still feels authentic.

Now that I understand that this has happened to other faith communities that preceded Muslims in America, I can predict the future of the American Muslim community and help shape it.

When I marry an Egyptian Muslim boy to a Japanese girl, as I did recently, I know that their children will think of themselves as Americans first while still enjoying their blended ethnicity.

Of course, nothing is perfect. The tensions among religions is still evident here, especially suspicion of the Muslim immigrants flocking to the West.

That's when it is important to look at God's point of view rather than our own parochial point of view. We tend to think of the Jewish faith, the Christian faith and the Islamic faith as Moses, Inc., Jesus, Inc. and Muhammad, Inc.

But we believe as Muslims that God sent prophets to every community in the world. In spite of the differences among religions in language and ritual, the substantive content of all religion is the same.

Shouldn't we think of religion as God, Inc. with Moses, Jesus, Muhammad as regional managers?

That may sound flip, but the shift would allow us to speak about religion from God's perspective, which should focus on our shared humanity rather than our differences. When we speak that way, faith - especially my faith that is enduring such turmoil — becomes more universal and less divisive.