

Ramadan, Muslims and extremism

By Imraan Buccus

Muslims around the world will, next week, begin a month long fast as the month of Ramadan begins – the month when the holy book of Muslims, the Qur'an was revealed. During this month all adult Muslims are required to fast from dawn until sunset for the entire month. Essentially the fast requires abstention from food, drink and sexual intercourse. However, it is actually more than just that, hence the greater sense of religiosity among Muslims in this month. "Fasting has been prescribed for you, as it has been prescribed to those before you, so that you may learn self-restraint," says the Qur'an. That "self-restraint" is to play itself out in various ways apart from the fast. Participants in this month of abstention pay particular heed to not getting angry – no mean feat when one has not eaten or drunk for the entire day.

A particularly striking social aspect of the month is the personal commitment by all worshippers to increase their charity in this month. In South Africa millions have already being set aside by Muslim businesses and individuals. These amounts will be distributed in Ramadan, a part to Muslim organisations and institutions, a part to welfare organisations and a part to individuals deserving of charity. The zakah, another of the five defining ritual duties of a Muslim is a compulsory wealth tax of 2,5 percent and is usually distributed in this month. Indeed, the social aspect of Ramadan is regarded very seriously. Most Muslims even suggest that one of the significances of the fast is identification with those that are poverty-stricken, so that they may feel their pangs of hunger. 'Worldly pleasures' are also reduced during this month and most would take part in additional prayers.

And during this month special food is prepared in many households and generally women bear the burden for much of the preparation. Thus apart from attempting to increase their worship and service to God and His creation, women also find themselves having to increase their service to their families as well – often in extravagant and unnecessary ways.

No doubt the month of Ramadan is important in the religious imagination of Muslims throughout the world, and Ramadan is being observed during a difficult socio-

political context for Muslims around the world. The latest madness, as is well known now, being the massacre of close to 100 people in Oslo, Norway in an attempt to save Europe from the 'Islamisation' and multiculturalism.

In a post 9-11 context where Muslims have come to be seen as extremists, some Muslims are even forced to negotiate their identities in different ways, sometimes and in some contexts, downplaying their 'Muslimness', in case it 'counts against them.' But interestingly there is also a contemporary wave among Muslims of a re-alignment to Islam. This may seem ironic and fascinating to observers - but in some ways it is a reaction to disillusionment with the imperial and colonising capitalist project of the West. For example, a number of Muslim intellectuals who had, decades ago, strayed away from Islam are relocating themselves within the religion and beginning to challenge empire more generally through their new ideological location. They are also observing the rituals; meaning that those who may not have observed the fast in Ramadan previously are starting to take the fast seriously.

So, the fast means God consciousness, self restraint, greater charity initiatives and awareness of the social realities of hunger and want. Hopefully it also means greater support for South Africa and the world's poor and continually disadvantaged.

The current context thus raises the challenge of ensuring that this renewed energy in religion, particularly during the fast, is directed towards the objective of development, poverty alleviation and the global struggle against all forms of oppression.

The first day after Ramadan is the festival of Eid al-Fitr – this year on the 31st August. The fast has ended and the festivities begin. It is usually a day for families to get together, with much greeting, hugging, laughing and feasting. But at least one of the social responsibilities of Ramadan is not forgotten. Traditionally, the day of Eid cannot belong to those who do not cleanse their wealth with special charity to be given on this day.