

The Feast of Eid al-Adha: Why Celebrate Sacrifice?

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This past Thursday, the day Muslims around the world celebrated one of their two solemn feasts, Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice, 769 pilgrims making their Hajj were tragically killed and 863 were injured in a stampede.

I offer this prayer from a Muslim funeral service for them out of compassion for our shared humanity and respect for their faithfulness to their beliefs. It is a way of expressing in the words of Pope Francis “our closeness” with them and their grieving families. I invite you to stand if you are able and face the back doors, the direction to Mecca.

O Allah, Your servants, the sons and daughters of Your maidservant, are in need of Your mercy and You are without need of their punishment. If they were righteous, then increase their reward and if they were wicked, then look over their sins.

An estimated two million Muslims come to Mecca annually to make their Hajj. To do so once in their life is one of the five pillars of Islam, along with professing that there is one God and Mohammad is God’s messenger, praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and practising charitable giving according to one’s wealth. While there are many flavours of Islam, as there are in all the other great faiths, including Unitarianism, all Muslims everywhere practise some version of these five pillars. It is their Seven Principles. To not practise them is to not be a Muslim; just as to not seeking to live out our principles is to not be a Unitarian.

The Hajj is the highlight of a Muslim’s spiritual life. It always occurs in the same Islamic month. Like Judaism, Islam has a lunar calendar, so the dates vary. As the pilgrim approaches Mecca he or she must change dress to clothing that is essentially two white sheets sewn together so no one is either ashamed or proud of their dress. For in God’s eyes there is no difference between a prince and a pauper, a man and a woman.

The Hajj includes a set of rituals each pilgrim performs:

The first is walking seven times around the Kaaba, the first house of worship. The Quran says Ibrahim built it with his son Ishmael according to God’s instructions.

Then touching the Black Stone, a stone that Mohammad said fell from heaven, perhaps a meteor, that he set intact into the wall of the Kaaba in 605 CE.

A more strenuous ritual is travelling seven times between Mt Safa and Mt Marwah. In Islamic tradition Ibrahim was commanded by God to leave his wife Hagar and infant son in the desert between these two hills. When their provisions were spent, Hagar went in search of water. She climbed the nearest hill, Mt Safa. When she found nothing, she went to Mt Marwah. Again, she found nothing. She climbed both mounts seven times before returning to her son in the scorching heat. When she returned she found a spring had broken forth at the feet of her son. Tradition says it sprang from where the angel Gabriel’s wing hit the ground. The spring is known as Zamzam Well or Hagar’s Well and drinking from it is part of the Hajj.

The final ritual of Hajj during the four days of Eid al-Adha is the stoning of the devil at Mina, near Mecca. Mina, where there are 160,000 tents pitched for the pilgrims, is where the stampede occurred. The stoning is considered the most dangerous part of the pilgrimage. There have been several occasions where thousands of participants have suffocated or been trampled to death. Steps have been taken to minimise the risk near the site of the stoning just

outside the town, but this week's stampede occurred in the town of Mina itself.

The ritual is a re-enactment of Ibrahim's pilgrimage to Mecca to fulfil a dream from God to sacrifice his son Ishmael to demonstrate his faithfulness to God. It is the Muslim version of the story in Genesis of Abraham being told to sacrifice Isaac, Ishmael's half-brother. As he left Mina for Mecca, the devil sought to tempt Ibrahim not to do it. The angel Gabriel told him to throw seven stones at him to drive him away. Then the devil tried to tempt Hagar to dissuade Ibrahim from making the sacrifice. Ibrahim threw another seven stones. Lastly, the devil sought to tempt Ishmael, who had agreed to the sacrifice out of his love for God, not to let himself be sacrificed. Ishmael refused and Ibrahim once again threw seven stones. In Mina, there are three pillars representing the three temptations that pilgrims throw seven stones at to drive away the devil. The stoning of the pillars represents the sacrifice of ego. It is an act of casting aside our low desires and wishes as an act of submission to God.

At the end of the Hajj during Eid al-Adha a feast is held to celebrate that before Ibrahim could cut Ishmael's throat, God substituted a ram telling him he had fulfilled the vision.

Eid al-Adha is not just celebrated by the pilgrims, but by Muslims throughout the world. In Muslim countries it is a public holiday. Men, women and children are expected to dress in their finest clothing to perform Eid prayer in a large congregation in an open field or mosque. Affluent Muslims, who can afford to, sacrifice their best domestic animals (usually a cow, but can also be a camel, goat, sheep or ram, depending on the region) as a symbol of Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his only son. The sacrificed animals have to meet certain age and quality standards or else the animal is considered an unacceptable sacrifice. This tradition accounts for the slaughter of more than 100 million animals in only two days of Eid. In Pakistan alone nearly 10 million animals are slaughtered on Eid days, costing over US\$3 billion.

The meat from the sacrificed animal is to be divided into three parts. The family retains one third of the share; another third is given to relatives, friends and neighbours; and the remaining third is given to the poor and needy. This practice makes sure no impoverished person is left without an opportunity to partake in the sacrificial meal during these days.

Clearly blood sacrifice is an essential element of this celebration. It is an ancient practice that predates all the Abrahamic faiths but it is found in all of them. It goes back to the idea that the gods must be placated. When bad things happen it must be because we have displeased the gods. It is our deserved punishment. To be spared further hardship the gods demand blood, preferably ours. However, we can offer a scapegoat to pay for our unfaithfulness as long as it is a perfect specimen.

In Judaism it is the Passover lamb. It is the blood of a lamb without blemish painted over the doorway of each Hebrew's home that protected them from the angel of death Yahweh sent to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians when he plagued Pharaoh to let his people go.

For many Christians, it is Jesus. Jesus was viewed as the perfect human whose blood would satisfy God. His death on the cross was necessary to spare us punishment for our sins. For those Christians who accept this meaning of the cross, this was the last blood sacrifice God demanded. For a few Christians, including myself, this is a ghastly explanation of what the cross means. It amounts to divine child abuse. That it is a metaphor makes it no less offensive.

What is interesting to me is that only Islam, of the three, does not consider blood sacrifice to be an essential part of its faith. Sacrifice is not one of the five pillars. The sacrifice is not asked for in the Quran. It goes back to pre-Islamic traditions of ancient Arabia. The slaughter of so many animals for Eid is to have a celebratory feast at the conclusion of Hajj. That it is

Islam's greatest feast is a statement about the importance of Hajj. It is not about restoring a Muslim's relationship with Allah or with other people, which is the primary purpose of sacrifice, the setting something apart from the secular or profane for use by supernatural powers.

We in the West are tempted to see Islam as monolithic. That all Muslims think and act and believe alike. Some of our misconceptions are that it is an uncivilized religion when in fact it is responsible for having preserved ancient Greek knowledge during Europe's Dark Ages. It has produced renowned scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, and artists, poets, and architects. It has made contributions to every aspect of human culture. As Unitarians we can appreciate that it is the most rational of the great faiths, since it eschews the miraculous. The only miracle the Quran acknowledges is the Quran itself, as a gift from Allah that was received by Mohammad.

With this in mind I sought thoughts on the subject of animal sacrifice from a Muslim perspective. Shahid Ali Muttaqi, a Muslim activist for the ethical treatment of animals living in the US, offers a very thoughtful analysis of the subject. His conclusion is, "The time has come for all true Muslims, be they Sunni or Shi'a, Sufi or otherwise, to stand up for the universal standards of justice and compassion that the Prophet not only spoke of, but actually put into practice. For those who need to take a life in order to survive, then let them do so humbly and with respect for the life they are forced to take, showing as much mercy and compassion as humanely possible in an otherwise regrettable situation. However, for those of us who no longer need to kill in order to survive, then let us cease to do so merely for the satisfaction of ravenous cravings, which are produced by nothing more than our lower self. That would truly be the Sunnah [the verbally transmitted teachings, deeds and thoughts] of the Prophet."

His conclusions are based on a number of concerns. Before listing them he acknowledges that challenging the practice of animal sacrifice is a sensitive one for Muslims, still reeling from years of colonialism. Many see defending it as a rallying point against further Western conquest. He points out, "Everywhere we turn, our faith is both subtly and overtly belittled, and we are continually pressured to adopt Western ways, to assimilate into the so-called 'more civilized culture.' Meanwhile, many well-meaning individuals in the Western world fall victim in their own way to this legacy of colonialism and even more so to the legacy of the Crusades.

"Stereotypes of the Muslim world are so entrenched in Western culture, that many tolerant, opened-minded people who would ordinarily never seek to demean an entire segment of humanity (be it a religious, cultural, or racial group) do so nonetheless as if it's almost second nature (apparently not even recognizing they're doing it) when it comes to Islam.

"In relation to the discussion of animal welfare, this tendency among Westerners usually places the Islamic world as the 'Barbaric Other,' an isolated domain whose population is steeped in superstition and somehow outside the realm of reason and intellectual discussion, thus making it an impenetrable wilderness, viewed as forever lost territory. When contact is made, it is usually done so begrudgingly and in a condescending manner -- a sort of last ditch effort to 'save the savages from themselves.' Rather than seeing Islam and its ensuing culture as being of the same level of complexity and diversity as their own religious beliefs and traditions, they view us as a remote and distant minority population, whose opinions are assumed to be one and the same, that is, backward and irrelevant (even though in reality we represent one of the largest blocks of humanity, with a diverse range of opinions).

"With this in mind, it is ultimately up to us as Muslims to take the first step, to speak out about pressing issues of ethics and morality, both for the sake of our own community and its continual advancement with the rest of humanity, as well as to clear up misconceptions in the

Western world that ultimately hurt us all. For it is ONE world. And if we are to better the planet on which we live, it is going to take mutual respect and cooperation among all of humankind.”

From here he goes on to discuss the moral and ethical questions around the ritual slaughter of animals. He notes that it is not an obligation of Islam and that Islam does not believe in appeasing an “angry God.” The story of the sacrifice of Ishmael in the Quran never says God demanded that Ibrahim kill his son. Instead of killing for the expiation of sins, Islam demands personal sacrifice and submission. Animal sacrifice began as a way to remember the story of Ibrahim, but it was and still is understood as making a personal sacrifice by sharing limited means of survival with the poorer members of their community. The ritual itself is NOT the sacrifice.

He argues that what is sacrificed does not have to be an animal. It is the act of giving thanks that matters. Animals are mentioned in the Quran in relation to sacrifice only because in that time, place, and circumstance, animals were the means of survival. But do not assume that Muslims are forever stuck in those circumstances, or that the act of eating meat, or killing an animal is what makes one a Muslim.

He then continues to make his case for forsaking animal sacrifice by arguing that the Quran requires that all animal life be treated with respect and, when animals are killed for survival, that it be done in a humane fashion, but sadly in a world of cruel factory farming this no longer often the case. He points out, “The majority of animals used for sacrifice during the Hajj are not even raised or killed in a Halal manner. These days, the numbers of animals needed are so high that the majority are imported from New Zealand and other countries. The raising of these animals (along with those for meat and wool export) is contributing to the environmental destruction of New Zealand’s eco-system. Furthermore, these animals are shipped in brutally overcrowded conditions where large percentages regularly die from disease, being trampled, or heat exhaustion. This is not humane. This is not halal. And we can’t ignore this reality. It’s not enough to acknowledge that the situation is unfortunate. We as Muslims must not only change our own actions that help create this situation, but also speak out for the protection of Allah’s innocent creatures. We’re not living 1400 years ago, and whether some of us like it or not, the world is changing

“For those of us living in the modern world, we have to seriously question practices that not only have lost meaning (in our present circumstances), but also are contributing to needless bloodshed and environmental destruction (not to mention the health problems incurred by meat-eaters).”¹

So, this Eid I join Shahid ali Muttaqi in proposing that we consider sacrificing eating anything we do not need for survival that is raised in an inhumane and environmentally destructive manner. That is a sacrifice worth celebrating.

i Shahid 'Ali Muttaqi, *The Sacrifice of "Eid al-Adha": An Islamic perspective against animal sacrifice.*
<http://www.islamicconcern.com/sacrifice01.asp>