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Discussing Eid al-Adha

Tasneem Project

10 January 2006

I've never really 'done' Eid al-Adha. This is one Muslim festival I have problems engaging fully with. I'm vegetarian, and putting aside the short periods where I ate meat to be a 'proper' Muslim, and the dark years in the 1990s when I didn't believe in or care much about anything, I have been a plastic shoe wearing vegetarian since 1981.

Nevertheless, I intend to keep the days in my own way. For the special meal, I will be cooking an East African beanie korma, much beloved by my good friend Jo, and for my daughters and possibly Julie I will be making a warm, homely tarragon flavoured pea and potato soup, from my own recipe, insha Allah! And in this meat-free environment, I will contemplating my understanding of this Eid.

What does Eid al-Adha mean to me? The idea of having a faith so absolute that one is prepared to casually snuff your own son no doubt appeals to a certain mindset, with its connotations of unquestioning faith and superiority of revealed commands over human will and morality. Not me! Time to revisit the story, I think, care of my newly acquired 'Stories of the Qur'an' by Mohammad Hifzur Rehman Seoharvi.

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Rather than taking the tale literally, I want to explore the story's wider meaning. In my own interpretation, the story of Ibrahim and Isma'il is one of series of narratives surrounding the Prophetic life of Ibrahim, where the common theme is discussion. The first is the discussion between Ibrahim and his father, where Ibrahim is forced to go his own way in order to remain true to his belief in tawhid.

However, such differences were not a matter of animosity, for Ibrahim was "tender hearted, forbearing" (9:114). Indeed, the idea of quiet reasoning continues in the second discussion, with King Namrud. Here, the King attempts to assert God-like qualities, such as being able to take life; but his reasoning is undermined when asked if he was able to make the sun rise in the West.

The theme of discussion continues in the story of the aborted sacrifice of Isma'il. On receiving the revelation calling on him to sacrifice his son, Ibrahim does not leap up and begin sharpening his knife grimly, but first tells his son of the dreams. Only with his son's consent does he try to enact the sacrifice. His son complies not from fear of or devotion to his father, but from an understanding of tawhid.

Tawhid is at the heart of Ibrahim's prophetic mission. But even this fundamental understanding is not imposed upon him by a shot of revelation, but instead comes about through a debate with himself, in which he compares the impermanence of the world, including the setting sun, with his own religious feelings of awe and humility at the heart of his God-consciousness.

I do not believe it is necessary to participate in blood sacrifice in order to comply with the will of Allah, at Eid or on any other day. I could never knowingly take the life of an animal, either for food or clothing, in a state of taqwa. This would contradict my belief that Raheem (Mercy) is at the very heart of such awareness. But I will never demand that such practices be abolished.

I simply invite other God-conscious Muslims to a peaceful discussion of the issue. Better still, and perhaps more fitting for this special time, I invite you to consider the issues put forward by vegetarians and vegans, and like Ibrahim (aws), undergo an honest debate with yourself.

Allah knows better.

Wasalaam