

Three Faiths Summer School 2008
Ammerdown Centre

Festivals and Feasts
Blessed Months, Days and Nights
of the Islamic Year
Spiritual, cultural and social dimensions



*"Intercession, o Messenger of God" – Ramadan Illumination
at the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul*

Blessed Nights and Days of the Islamic Year

Years, months, days and nights

Like in all religions and cultures stemming from the Middle East, the calendar of Islam depends on the cycles of the seven days of the week, the months according to the phases of the moon and the year.

In this calendar Muslims have established:

Friday as a special day of congregation in the week,

Ramadan as a blessed month of fasting with *Lailat al-qadr*, a blessed "night of power"

two major feast days, *Eid al-fitr* and *Eid al-adha*, connected with the last two pillars of Islam, fasting and pilgrimage,

one day and a blessed night commemorating the Prophet Muhammad,

one day commemorating other prophets

and Shi'ah Muslims days of remembering and mourning.

In addition local Muslim culture and folk traditions have also adopted festivals of other religious or cultural origins.

***Al-jum'ah* - Friday, the "day of congregation"**

The seven days of the week begin with Sunday and end on Saturday (*as-sabt*), which in the consciousness of the Muslims is clearly identified with the Jewish Sabbath. In the pre-Islamic society of the oasis of Yathrib (Medina), the day before the Sabbath was a day of gathering and merchandising at the local markets, when a revelation calls for the noon prayer as a compulsory congregational prayer of Muslims: "O you who have attained to faith! When the call to prayer is sounded on the day of congregation, hasten to the remembrance of God, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your own good, if you but knew it. And when the prayer is ended, disperse freely on earth and seek to obtain [something] of God's bounty; but remember God often, so that you might attain to a happy state!" (62:9f Surah Al-Jumu'ah) In traditional Muslim societies, the Friday has become the high point of the week as a day of relaxation and gathering, but has not fully developed into a day of rest from work. The congregational prayer is an event of great social importance. According to certain *ahadith* ("traditions of the prophet") and theological speculation of later centuries, Friday has become a day of blessing and spiritual significance for all Muslims. This includes Thursday evening, a time most appropriate to spiritual and marital relations, because Friday like all days of the week starts with the sunset of the day before.

Narrated Salman Al-Farsi: Allah's Apostle said, "Anyone who takes a bath on Friday and cleans himself as much as he can and puts oil (on his hair) or scents himself; and then proceeds for the prayer and does not force his way between two persons (assembled in the mosque for the Friday prayer), and prays as much as is written for him and remains quiet when the Imam delivers the Khutba, all his sins in between the present and the last Friday will be forgiven."
Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Adoption of the calendar with 12 lunar months

In the pre-Islamic Middle East all dates were established on lunar months, which start and end with the new moon. A year with twelve lunar months (29 ½ days) counts up to 354 or 355 days and falls short of a solar year of 365 days by ten or eleven days. To keep in accordance with the solar year and its seasons, the Arabs - like all their neighbours of Semitic tongue - inserted a supplementary month from time to time in their calendar. This custom had to be abandoned by Muslims due to a revelation in the second year of the *hijra*, when Muhammad and his followers had left Mecca, settled down in Medina and built up their

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own community. “Behold, the number of months, in the sight of God, is twelve months, laid down in God's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth ... The intercalation of months is but one more instance of refusal to acknowledge the truth - a means by which those who are bent on denying the truth are led astray. They declare this intercalation to be permissible in one year and forbidden in another year, in order to conform outwardly to the number of months which God has allowed: and thus they make allowable what God has forbidden” (9:36f - Surah At-Tawbah)

By this means, holidays and the month of pilgrimage lose their connection with pre-Islamic times and pagan rites, which are mostly determined by the seasons of nature.

The months of the Islamic calendar

1st month: *Muharram* – called *Muharram al haram*, the “secluded Muharram”

2nd month: *Safar* – called *Safar al-muzaffar*, the “victorious Safar”

3rd month: *Rabi’al-awwal* – the “first Rabi’a”

4th month: *Rabi’ath-thani* – the “second Rabi’a”, or: *Rabi’al-akhir*

5th month: *Jumada al-ula* – the “first Jumada”

6th month: *Jumada al-akhir* – the “last Jumada” - or: *Jumada ath-thani*

7th month: *Rajab* – called *Rajab al-murajab*, the “honourable Rajab”

8th month: *Sha’aban* – called *Sha’aban al moazam*, the “respectable Sha’aban”

9th month: *Ramadan* – called *Ramadan al mubarak*, the “blessed Ramadan”

10th month: *Shawwal* – called *Shawwal al mukarram*, the “venerated Shawwal”

11th month: *Dhu al-Qi’dah*

12th month: *Dhu al-Hijjah*

Hijri and shamsi calendar

In the 17th year of the *hijra* the second Caliph Omar realised, that his letters and decrees lacked a consistent dating of the year. As a new reference date he took the year of the *hijra*, when Muhammad arrived in Medina in September 622 A.D. This habit was adopted by all his successors. To keep in accordance with the correct calculation of the agricultural seasons of the solar year, which cannot be neglected for taxation, all Muslim governments of later times also resorted to a *shamsi* “solar” calendar of some kind.

Hilal – moonsighting

To determine the beginning of a new lunar month, two reliable witnesses have to announce their sighting of the *hilal* – the small crescent of the new moon. The importance of this sighting for the calculation of the Islamic calendar and its establishment of dates for fasting or feast days have led some – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – to assume the crescent as a symbol of Islam, which is misleading. First: authentic Islam does not have any outward symbol and second: the crescent as a symbol for Muslim reign was simply adopted from Sassanid coins.

Specific atmospheric and weather conditions while sighting and the geographic distribution of Muslim communities result in differing dating of fasting periods and the feast days. This leads to a lot of - often heated – discussions and annoyance in the Muslim community, especially

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in Europe when parts of the community feel themselves still aligned to an African or Asian country with different dating.

Narrated Ibn `Umar: The Prophet said, "We are an illiterate nation; we neither write, nor know accounts. The month is like this and this, i.e. sometimes of 29 days and sometimes of thirty days."
Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Muharram – first month of the Islamic calendar and month of mourning

In pre-Islamic times Muharram was the beginning of the winter season. But nowadays the start of the new year has no special significance for the majority of Muslims.

What makes this month so special is the remembrance of Husayn's martyrdom, especially for Shi'ah Muslims. The grandson of the Prophet was killed together with his family and his followers in the year 61 A.H (680 A.D.) by troops of the reigning Omayid caliph, who feared that his followers might take power. For Shi'ah Muslims this battle on the outskirts of Karbala in Iraq has become a paradigmatic fight between good and evil and a key event of human salvation through the suffering and martyrdom of their beloved *imam*. (spiritual leader of the Muslims in the line of Prophet Muhammad's descendants). According to a tradition of the *imam* Jafar as-sadiq, whoever recites stories about Husayn and brings 50 to tears and starts crying himself will be rewarded by a place in paradise.

So the first ten days of Muharram are days of fasting for Shi'ah Muslims, who remember Husayn with *majlis*, gatherings where such poems are recited, processions with banners, replicas of Husayn's tomb and wailing believers and plays enacting the events of the battle of Karbala.

Ashura – 10th Muharram – day of remembrance of God's mercy

Ashura is a day of recommended fasting and joyful feasting for Sunni Muslims and a day of mourning for Shi'ah Muslims. Tradition holds the belief that on this day Adam was created, Noah left the ark, the children of Israel were saved from Pharaoh's men and Jacob regained his eyesight. *Ashura* has been adopted by the Muslims of Mecca and Medina from the local Jewish communities as a day of fasting. After ordering fasting in *Ramadan*, *Ashura* still remained a day of recommended fasting.

Narrated Aisha: The people used to fast on Ashura (the tenth day of the month of Muharram) before the fasting of Ramadan was made obligatory. And on that day the Kaaba used to be covered with a cover. When Allah made the fasting of the month of Ramadan compulsory, Allah's Apostle said, "Whoever wishes to fast (on the day of Ashura) may do so; and whoever wishes to leave it can do so."

Narrated Abu Musa: The day of Ashura was considered as Eid day [holiday] by the Jews. So the Prophet ordered, "I recommend you (Muslims) to fast on this day."
Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

On this day Shi'ah Muslims prepare substantial *ashura*-rice for mourning believers and Sunni Muslims of Turkey cook *ashure*, a rich desert of dried fruits, cereals and beans as the last meal on the ark of Noah, when nearly all food was gone and all the remaining scraps had to be cooked together.

Maulid – 12th Rabi'al awwal – birthday of the Prophet

Originally this day is the death day of the Prophet Muhammad, who according to the Quran (33:21) is *uswa hasana*, the best or most beautiful example for mankind. According to old custom, whenever a birthday was unknown, it was dated on the day of death. For many Muslims around the world this is a day of joy and public presentations. Crowds beat drums, sing and roam the streets. Sufi orders present themselves with banners and parades. In the

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mosques of Turkey special poems celebrating the birth of the beloved messenger with all of nature taking part in it are recited. People prepare sweets and give them away as gifts. In Turkey and Iran *zarde*, a yellow colored saffron rice dessert, and in North Africa *ashida*, a sweet meal of cereals and honey is prepared for the families and their guests.

Celebrations like this have been criticised by some Muslims since medieval times, who consider it *bid'a* – unlawful and un-Islamic innovation.

Three blessed months – *Rajab*, *Sha'aban* and *Ramadan*

Not only *Ramadan al-mubarak*, the “blessed Ramadan” is regarded as a time of the year of high spiritual significance, also its two preceding months are blessed months in the consciousness of the Muslim community around the world. *Rajab*, a respected month even in pre-Islamic times, in which warfare among the tribes of the Arabian peninsula was prohibited, is a recommended month for the *umra*, the minor pilgrimage to the *Kaaba*, the house of the Lord in Mecca. Both *Rajab* and *Shawwal* are months when Muslims prepare for the coming of Ramadan by voluntary fasting for some days and vigils in the mosques on certain blessed nights.

Narrated Aisha: Allah's Apostle used to fast till one would say that he would never stop fasting, and he would abandon fasting till one would say that he would never fast. I never saw Allah's Apostle fasting for a whole month except the month of Ramadan, and did not see him fasting in any month more than in the month of Sha'ban.

Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Laylat al-raghaib – the “night of gifts” preceding the first Friday in *Rajab*.

This night of beautiful gifts or valuables – this is the meaning of *raghaib* – is one of the three blessed nights in *Rajab* and *Sha'aban* that herald the coming time of *Ramadan*. They are celebrated as *kandil*, “lantern” festivals in Turkey, when mosques are illuminated during the night for vigil. Some Muslims also commemorate the date when Amina, the mother of the Prophet Muhammad, first realised she was pregnant.

Laylat al isra wa miraj – 27th *Rajab* – the “night journey and ascension”

In this blessed night Muslims remember the night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad to heaven, which are mentioned in the Quran. “Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of Worship [at Mecca] to the Remote House of Worship [at Jerusalem] - the environs of which We had blessed - so that We might show him some of Our symbols: for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing” (17:1 Surah Al-Isra) The journey was made according to tradition on a winged horse-like creature named *al-Buraq* and led to the place of the destroyed temple in Jerusalem, where later the *Qubbat as-Sakhra*, the Dome of the Rock, was built. Then Muhammad ascended to heaven, met other prophets with whom he conversed and worshipped, was instructed about the proper way to perform *as-salat*, the daily ritual prayer, and had a conversation with Allah at the last borders of heaven, where even the angels could not approach. Muslim tradition differed widely whether this was a vision on a high spiritual level or a physical occurrence, but the journey and ascension became a favorite subject for mystic speculation and the lore of Muslim culture.

Like in all *kandil* nights mosques are illuminated and open for vigil. According to common belief the gates of paradise are open and all prayers are answered in this night.

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Laylat al-bara'a – 15th Shaban – the “night of absolution”

In the night of the full moon of the last month before *Ramadan* the blessed month of fasting is nearer than ever. Muslim tradition has illustrated the advantages of this night. The doors of heaven are opened and angels stand at every door to give absolution to any believer yearning for it. Then the fate of men for the year to come is written down. Some Muslims fast during the preceding day and later in the night perform *salat al-khair*, a prayer of 100 units, or recite the Surah Yasin. *Halwa*, a nourishing sweet dish and *kandil simit*, sesame rolls, are prepared for eager worshippers, family and guests alike.

Ramadan al mubarak – the “blessed” month of fasting

The ninth month of the Islamic calendar is dedicated to fasting and remembrance of the mercy of guidance by the Quranic revelation. *“It was the month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was [first] bestowed from on high as a guidance unto man and a self-evident proof of that guidance, and as the standard by which to discern the true from the false. Hence, whoever of you lives to see this month shall fast throughout it; but he that is ill, or on a journey, [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days. God wills that you shall have ease, and does not will you to suffer hardship; but [He desires] that you complete the number [of days required], and that you extol God for His having guided you aright, and that you render your thanks [unto Him].”* (2:185 Surah Al-Baqara)

As-sawm, the fasting is one of the five “pillars” of Islam and, according to the medieval mystic Maulana Jalauddin Rumi, the most important one, because it means sacrificing one’s self and demanding nature. When the sun sets everybody rushes home to join in the *iftar* meal which breaks the fast and to which guests are invited. Muslims throughout the world never feel so strongly connected than in this month.

Although Muslims suffer hardships while fasting and abstaining from food, drink and sexual relation from dawn to sunset, this month is regarded as the high point of the year. Mosques in Turkey are decorated with *mahya*, illuminated bands of script hanging between the minarets. A merry atmosphere and attractions at nightly fairs and markets around the mosques may seem to distract the believers from the spiritual meaning of this month, but they also have the opportunity to join in the special *tarawih* prayers in the mosques – or to enjoy both.

It is a custom to read the Quran in full length in this month. Every day 1/30, a *juz*, is recited in the mosque. During the last ten days, *itikaf*, seclusion in the mosque or a quiet and undisturbed place of one’s choice is recommended for those who are capable of refraining from worldly affairs.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Fasting is a shield (or a screen or a shelter). So, the person observing fasting should avoid sexual relations with his wife and should not behave foolishly and impudently, and if somebody fights with him or abuses him, he should tell him twice, 'I am fasting.'" The Prophet added, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, the smell coming out from the mouth of a fasting person is better in the sight of Allah than the smell of musk. (Allah says about the fasting person), 'He has left his food, drink and desires for My sake. The fast is for Me. So I will reward (the fasting person) for it and the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times."

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "When the month of Ramadan starts, the gates of heaven are opened and the gates of hell are closed and the devils are chained."

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Whoever does not give up slandering and evil actions, Allah does not require him to leave his food and drink (i.e. Allah will not accept his fasting.)"

Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

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Laylat al qadr – 27th Ramadan – the “night of power or destiny”

The date of this night is not known for certain, but it must be among the last ten days of the *Ramadan*. It is a night of vigil and divine grace, better than a thousand months.”*Behold, from on high have We bestowed this [divine writ] on the Night of Destiny. And what could make thee conceive what it is, that Night of Destiny? The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months: in hosts descend in it the angels, bearing divine inspiration by their Sustainer's leave; from all [evil] that may happen does it make secure, until the rise of dawn.*” (96:1-5 Surah Al-Qadr)

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Whoever established prayers on the night of qadr out of sincere faith and hoping for a reward from Allah, then all his previous sins will be forgiven; and whoever fasts in the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, and hoping for a reward from Allah, then all his previous sins will be forgiven."

Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Eid al fitr – 1st Shawwal – Festival of breaking the fast

This is the minor of the two main festivals of Islam, a holiday of gratitude for blessings received and hardship mastered. On the morning of the holiday believers gather in the mosque or a *musalla*, a wide open space, for a short communal prayer with a sermon.

But before they can join in prayer the believers have to give an alm, *sadaqa al-fitr*, for the poor, so that even they can afford and enjoy good feasting. Any ascetic attempt to fast on these days are strictly forbidden.

The *eid* is celebrated for four days. Especially children enjoy the sweets distributed to everyone and the gifts given especially to them. The days are filled with joyful feasting and visits to the elders and the tombs of the deceased.

Narrated Ibn `Umar: Allah's Apostle enjoined the payment of one Sa' of dates or one Sa' of barley as Zakat-ul-Fitr on every Muslim slave or free, male or female, young or old, and he ordered that it be paid before the people went out to offer the Eid prayer. (One Sa' = 3 Kilograms approx.)

Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Dhu al-Hijjah – the month of pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to the house of the Lord, the *Kaaba* in Mecca, which was erected by Ibrahim and Ismail according to Islamic tradition, takes place in the first days of the last month of the Islamic calendar. The pilgrims remember Adam and Hawwa, Hajar and Ismail, as well as Ibrahim and Ismail, their worship, their endurance, their patience and their submission to God. The pilgrimage as a pillar of Islam is in contrast to the other ones a *fard al'ain*, an individual obligation, that only the capable can perform. This journey full of spiritual uplifting but also - especially in older times - of worldly dangers and hardships cannot be attended by every believer.

Yaum al arafat – 9th Dhu al-Hijjah – “day of Arafat”

Although absent from Mecca, Muslims around the world join in with the pilgrims on *hajj* during the *yaum al-arafat*, the climax of the pilgrimage, when millions stand on the barren plain in Arafat near Mecca, remembering the day of judgement to come, when all mankind will be collected before their Lord. It is a day of repentance and recommended fasting. Many visit the tombs of their beloved on this day, hoping and bearing in mind that they will be united with them after final judgement by a most merciful judge.

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***Eid al-adha* – 10th Dhu al-Hijjah – Festival of sacrifice**

The major one of the two great festivals of Islam marks the end of pilgrimage and is a remembrance of the sacrifice of Ibrahim and his son – according to the majority of Islamic theologians Ismail, not Isaac. Just like Ibrahim himself and the pilgrims at Mina near Mecca the Muslims of all countries slaughter animals – sheep, cattle or camel. The meat is consumed by the family and given away to the needy and the neighbours, whatever their religion may be. For many Muslims in the world this is the only opportunity in the year to eat meat for some days. “*And as for the sacrifice of cattle, We have ordained it for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in which there is [much] good for you. Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up [for sacrifice]; and after they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their flesh, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot (and does not beg), as well as him who is forced to beg. It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful.*” (22:36 Surah Al-Hajj)

Just as on *eid al-fitr* the holiday begins with a prayer in public. This festival is also celebrated for four days. Muslims buy and dress in new clothes and invite one another to share meals. In some countries it is a custom not to throw the bones of the sacrificed and digested animal in the litter but to bury them in a respectful way.

Local festivals dependent on the solar calendar

In various Muslim societies there are some festivals with local significance dependent on the solar calendar. They date back to pre-Islamic times and mostly derived from Egyptian, Zoroastrian, Hindu or Christian festivals. In Iran and Central Asia as well as in Eastern Turkey the *newruz*, the “new year” is celebrated with bonfires and happy feasting during the spring equinox on 21st March, customs which were first recorded 2,500 B.C. in Persia. In Turkey and Syria the *hidrellez*-festival, a merry spring gathering commemorating nature’s revival, is celebrated on 6th May, on the date of the orthodox St. George festival – but the Muslims’ patron of this day is *al-Khidr*, the “green one”, an arcane prophet mentioned in the Quran and sometimes identified with Elias. Some *maulids*, “birthdays”, or *urs*, “day of marriage” (but in reality day of death) of Egyptian or Indian Sufi saints are also bound to solar calendar calculation.

An Islamic perspective on time

Time according to the Quran has a beginning and an end, it began when Allah said *kun*, “be”, and it will also end in Him. *Az-zaman*, the time filled with changing days and nights, new and full moons, is a sign from Allah himself, giving the believer a measure for his worldly and religious duties. *Ad-dahr*, the *fatum*, time as a regulator of fate, is also created by Allah.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Allah said, "The offspring of Adam abuse the Dahr (Time), and I am the Dahr; in My Hands are the night and the day."

Hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Man as a weak and forgetful creature can get lost in the ups and downs of daily life, he can loose contact with Allah and eternity, the time by Allah which has no measure. Only in certain moments, *al waqt* - Meister Eckart’s “Nu” - can one get in contact with the eternity. Therefore the Sufi is called *ibn al waqt*, the “child of the moment”, when he is able to act instantly and spontaneously in the right way. In the mystic literature of Islam a tradition cites the Prophet Muhammad speaking of himself: “I have a time (*waqt*) with Allah in which not even Gabriel can enter, although he is pure spirit”.

“In the great moments of the Islamic holidays, it is perhaps possible for the believer to really feel this inner secret of time in a tangible way: during *laylat al-qadr*, the night of blessings that mark the very first of the Quranic revelations, or in the night in which the Prophet journeyed to heaven, when – according to tradition – he had the unimaginable experience of speaking

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with God face to face. Remembering such events may enable the believer to transcend the continuous cycle of days and nights or at least to grasp, as an uplifting event, the moment when the time that he is contemplating is penetrated by eternity. This is possible because feast days transform time, as we usually know it, into higher moments, that belong to eternity." (Annemarie Schimmel. Das Islamische Jahr. Zeiten und Feste. [The Islamic Year. Times and Festivals]. München: C.H.Beck p. 149)

والله أعلم

Wa Allah a'alam

And God knows best

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