

Gratitude to God is at the heart of Islam

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

Columbus Dispatch (Faith and Values), November 22, 2002

This is the time of year when many of us are focusing on being grateful to God for his blessings. Both Thanksgiving and Ramadan offer opportunities for such reflection. At the heart of Islam is the teaching that one should praise and be thankful to God in every circumstance.

Muslims answer the question, "How are you?" with the Arabic phrase "Alhamdulillah," which means, "Praise and thanks be to God." This response reflects the acceptance that God, who is loving and kind, cares for all his creatures with unbounded tenderness, mercy and wisdom. Regardless of whether we interpret our situation as easy or difficult, Muslims believe that every situation we face is placed before us by God for a reason, and that ultimately in that reason there is good and benefit for us. For this we are thankful to God.

The Quran teaches that human beings were created by God for the purpose of being grateful to him. "It is he who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing, and he gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection so that you may give thanks (to God)" (Quran 16:78).

The Quran also explains that one of Satan's main aims is to keep people from being grateful. After God sent him out of the garden for his arrogance and disobedience, Satan vowed in response: "I will lie in wait for them (human beings) on your straight way. Then I will assault them from in front of them and behind them, from their right and their left. Nor will you find, in most of them, gratitude (for your mercies)" (Quran 7:16-17).

Most faiths emphasize being grateful to God as a means of worship. At the essence of Islam is the teaching that those seeking inner peace must develop patience and trust in God such that they are thankful to him in every situation.

According to Islamic belief, one reason God allows people to undergo difficulty and trials during their lives is to test who will remain grateful to him. People who remain thankful, even in the face of great hardship, enter into a state of intimacy with their Lord. They attain an inner peace that protects them from the storms of the outside world.

Most of us can easily list many blessings for which we are thankful. We also tend to find it easy to list the difficulties in our lives. We often think that if God would just fix our problems for us, then we would be completely content. Our challenge is to learn to always be thankful for and content with God's bounties, even in adversity.

Gratitude to God does not arise from the removal of external stressors; rather, it is an internal state of the heart. This state is consciously achieved by continuous struggle and effort as we reflect on the blessings and mercy of God and strive to block out the whispers of negativism and discontent that keep our souls in a state of ingratitude.

I was inspired by the example of a Pakistani couple I once knew whose only child had a serious genetic disease. The parents were young, far from their family, and faced the trial of their newborn baby dying in front of their eyes over the course of a few months. They spent many sleepless nights attending to him at home and in the hospital. No one would have faulted them for voicing their frustration and

suffering as they dealt with the heartbreak of caring for their terminally ill baby.

Despite the hardships they faced, their emotions were tempered by their trust in God and their belief that there is always reason and benevolence in God's will. Whenever the parents were asked how they were doing, they would sincerely respond, "Alhamdulillah." Every time. In every condition. This phrase expressed their gratitude to God for his help and support in their time of trial and for giving them the strength to deal with each challenge they faced. Even in their grief after the death of their child, they remained thankful for the short time they had had with him.

Being grateful to God is essential to our well-being in life. A heart filled with thankfulness has no room for self-pity or despair. With the understanding that praise and thankfulness is due to God in every circumstance, souls find contentment and hearts find peace.

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