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A chance for a clean slate

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RAMADAN leaves no one in any doubt that Malaysia is a Muslim majority, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. Town traffic patterns change. The streets (except for the bazaars) feel slightly emptier. Everything winds down by a notch or two. It gets a little harder for newspapers to fill up their pages.

But that should not be so. For, in the true spirit of Ramadan, Muslims should work harder and be more productive. Allah forbids Muslims to retreat during the holy month.

Prophet Muhammad was sometimes exasperated by his over-zealous early followers who wished to emulate him in the slightest detail of the sunnah (optional practice), the tendency to show "monomaniacal pietism" to the exclusion of capturing the intended spirit of devotion.

In this the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims feel more Muslim than in the rest of the year. It is not just a time of fasting, austerity and self-denial, but of a joyous sense of belonging. The month of the revelation of the Quran is celebrated by the unity of the ummah, by charity, good works and congregational worship, especially the terawih prayer.

It is natural to appear to be spending more time praying and meditating during Ramadan, especially during the terawih and post-terawih prayers. But the Messenger incidentally prayed only 11 rakaah (eight rakaah for terawih and three for witr), not 20 or more. Besides, terawih is not compulsory, though highly recommended.

Whatever the preachers say, Ramadan is not about white-knuckle devotion to Allah. There is conviviality and brother-hood amid piety. In Medina, the Prophet's resting place, people line the concourse into and inside the Prophet's Mosque at maghrib, the canonical hour that marks the breaking of the fast, offering and sharing dates, sweets, cakes and drinks. The iftar or meal that ends the fast is not lavish but immersed in democratic fellowship.

At the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Islam's holiest shrine, knots of men spread picnic cloths and serve coffee, tea and dates to all comers. There is a pervasive sense of goodwill as people bustle in and out late into the night performing supernumerary rites and reciting the Quran, always trying to finish the text. They do not look dour or grim. They exult in their faith. After terawih, Mecca and Medina do not sleep. The people sleep during daytime up to the midday prayer.

For ordinary Muslims, the pleasure of Ramadan is in delaying pleasure. Appetites sharpen after self-willed, complete abstention. Throughout the Islamic world, dates (kurma) and sweets are a sell-out. In the Gulf region, it is jelebi, pakora, samosa and kunafa. In Malaysia, the list of kueh-mueh is much longer. I have received three packages of dates, two from acquaintances, the other unknown. I thank them.

The craving for sweetness goes beyond the soothing of hunger and thirst. Many Muslims spend more in Ramadan as they rejoice in family and friendship. Some even gain weight. The intent of puasa is surely not served by fraternal over-consumption although I don't find this particularly objectionable.

What I do find hard to stomach is Ramadan's increasing commercialisation. Like Christmas, Hari Raya too has become big business. Too many people, encouraged by advertisements and promotions, take Ramadan

as an excuse to slow down, eat up and spend. Seasonal street traders make a fast buck on the lure of temptation after a full day of privation.

Even so, growing fat, Ramadan or otherwise, isn't a sin in Islam, for which fasting is a pillar of faith, not an immolatory act of worldly renunciation. Except for the holy month of Ramadan, the Prophet discourages continuous fasting.

While I was in ISA detention for five years, I fasted every day except for the six forbidden days (including the two Hari Raya) and I found that it cleansed my soul. If there was a time when I was sinless, it must have been during my detention. Islam does not expect its adherents to starve in the name of God. But I am determined to shed 10 pounds to make me overweight only by 10!

You fast in order to savour the things you have by deliberately going without them. Everything derives from God and we as mortals need to remind ourselves of how little we deserve His blessings. Ramadan is meant for giving and sharing, formalised by the payment of obligatory tithes and alms for the poor and feeding them instead of the advantaged, though there is no harm in entertaining your peers.

Fasting, in Islam much more than in other organised religions, is the simplest act of piety. As Malays, we once kept our faith sweet, simple and unique to us. But over the last three decades, many of us have striven for a rigid, contrived purity that conflicts with the tolerant form of Islam we took centuries to absorb and modulate.

As a result, I think we are becoming more religious, but less pious. The Islam of my childhood and youth is fading into nostalgia.

The writer Anthony Burgess (who taught me English for a term at Malay College Kuala Kangsar under his real name, John Wilson) had this to say about my home state in the late 1950s:

"The Malays of Kelantan, apart from speaking a dialect which was painful to learn, had an Islamic culture which no Iranian ayatollah would tolerate. The women of the faith scorned the purdah and considered themselves to be superior to their menfolk.

"They were women of great grace and beauty and had few inhibitions about sex. That Islam was too blatantly a faith of male domination they recognised without, as yet, being able to reform it through reference to the Quran."

There are now women such as the Sisters in Islam who are trying to change that. Still, the irony of Islam in the Malay heartland is that women were more liberated then than they are now. The ayatollahs and the South Asian mullahs would approve. And the bilious critics on the other side of the fence such as V.S. Naipaul will continue to see Islam in the Malay archipelago as a form of colonialism, alien and destructive to its heritage and culture.

Burgess thought that the loose matrimonial behaviour allowed for men by Islam coupled with emancipated woman-hood led to a high divorce rate. I don't think so, and I think I know better. Marriages lasted longer in those days because monogamy was the unquestioned norm. Most people did not know, and never bothered to discover, the details of shotgun divorce (unless, of course, they had a reason to).

Burgess makes fun of the divorce utterance or talak, by calling it a cantrip, a witch's trick. I can't blame him, though it pains me to have my religion so ignorantly reduced to mockery. I ignored him because he was a very unhappy man, a womaniser and later a divorcee, with chips on both shoulders, who once considered converting to Islam after he became disillusioned with Roman Catholicism and communism. Without its spirit, an understanding of its universal values and its cultural and social anchors, Islam can easily be, and is, shrivelled into a husk of petty rules.

The blindness of such rules can give rise to a case like Aida Melly Tan Mutalib's, who waited seven years to obtain a divorce. There are protections in the Syariah for wives and women, as Aida Melly herself proved by successfully suing for a termination of her marriage. The problem is not in the outcome, but in how long it took, and how difficult it was, to reach one.

Only a lax system of legal administration could have permitted such a lengthy extenuation of the wantonness of prejudiced men. Some commentators contend that the popularity of the Syariah among the urban Muslim middle classes is due to their disenchantment with the so-called secular alternative.

Aida Melly proved them quite wrong. Justice was grievously delayed and very nearly denied in her case as it has been for many other abandoned wives. On the other hand, she has stayed true to her faith and fought for her rights within it.

Ramadan is meant to show Muslims at their best, not at their over-ritualised, over-literal worst. It would be a great disservice to Islam if all we have left to live by is the eminence of our bad examples. I want to say more, but Ramadan behoves me to bite my tongue.

Tonight I am going to break fast at the house of a prominent politician (the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali will be guests of honour) and I will tell several new mutakif (a person who does nothing but pray during Ramadan) that they do not have to be in seclusion for the whole month. Prophet Muhammad recommended only a night would do though many people prefer 10 nights.

In any event, Ramadan gives Muslims a chance to wipe the slate clean. Everyone is looking for the mystery of the Lailatulqadar, the blessed night on which the Quran was revealed, which falls some time during the month. I hope at least some of us may find it.