

STATE MUSLIMS CELEBRATE SEASON OF PILGRIMAGE

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While the United States prepares for a possible war with a Muslim nation, Muslims in West Virginia are putting aside disagreements as they prepare for a festival of sacrifice.

The second holiest day on the Muslim calendar arrives Tuesday with the season of pilgrimage, or Hajj, and the festival of sacrifice, or Eid al-Adha. Muslims believe that God commanded the Hajj or pilgrimage as one of the five pillars of their faith.

Mohammad Jamal Daoudi is the imam or spiritual leader of the Islamic Association of West Virginia. Daoudi explained the meaning of the two holy events this way:

"Pilgrimage is for Muslims a training course in faith and ethics. It increases faith, uplifts the spirit, and inculcates only the best conduct and manners of all pilgrims. This is the result for all those who have performed it properly, avoiding all sins, arguments, gossiping and other violations of the sacred rituals. Prophet Muhammad - peace be unto him - said: 'Perform Hajj for it cleans sins as water cleans dirt.'"

Daoudi also said, "Hajj provides a lot of benefits for this life as well as for the hereafter. It is, in effect, a one nation conference made of all Muslims in the world, where more than 2 million Muslims gather from all over the world to worship Allah and perform their rituals together."

More than 6,000 pilgrims from the United States are expected to make the journey this year, he said. As part of the Hajj, Muslims meet in Mecca, and they are dressed the same and perform the same rituals.

This is an important part of the faith, he explained. "In Islam all are equal: pauper or prince, African or Arab, Malaysian or Swedish, Russian or American. Differences in wealth, language and nationality, are irrelevant. All are Muslims, brothers and sisters to each other."

He also explained that by dressing in plain white dress, they express equality. The dress shows a rejection of luxury and decoration and helps them to think of the day of judgment, when, he said, all humanity will be resurrected naked.

The pilgrims respond to Allah by their actions and repeat: "Here I am, Lord, here I am!" This shows "submission to the one God, the unique, the most merciful and most gracious, and to promise repeatedly to follow his commands and avoid his prohibitions," he said.

The pilgrims also do what they call "circumambulating." This means moving counter-clockwise around the Ka'ba. The Ka'ba is the house of God in the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca.

By glorifying the symbol with their physical movements, the pilgrims are glorifying God, he said. "In standing at the door of the Ka'ba, there is a lesson of a commitment to Allah to follow all that is good and avoid all that is bad."

Muslims trace their lineage to Abraham, whom they call a prophet. Abraham is found in the pages of the Muslim Koran and the Old Testament, used by both Christians and Jews. When pilgrims run between the hills of Safa and Marwah, they commemorate Abraham's wife, Hagar. When she was abandoned in the desert, she ran between the hills looking for water for her son Ishmael.

When pilgrims stand on Mount Arafat all together praising God, they glorify him and supplicate him, Daoudi explained. "There is no distinction between rich and poor, black and white, Chinese or European, Arab or non-Arab. Here is a lesson in equality, liberation, and training for that terrifying standing at the day of judgment," Daoudi said.

As part of the commemoration, they also slaughter animals for the feast, and they also feed the poor. This is also based on the story of Abraham whom God told to sacrifice his son. But at the last moment, God ransomed Ishmael with a ram, according to Daoudi.

"There are lots of the lessons of the Hajj in Islam," Daoudi said. "All of the rituals, however, are meant to help the pilgrims acquire the talent of remembering Allah in all that they do, so that they become closer to him. In so doing, they become as pure as angels walking on the earth. The Hajj can be considered like a manufacturing factory, where the raw material - a believer - is manufactured into an almost perfect creation - only Allah is perfect - and morally perfected in every way."

At the end of the Hajj, Daoudi said, Muslims all over the world hold the second-biggest celebration of the Islamic calendar. It is called Eid al-Adha (festival of sacrifice) celebrating the successful completion of the Hajj by those in Mecca, who are joined by all Muslims around the world in giving thanks to Allah for his forgiveness and mercy.

"Eid al-Adha is a time of prayer and supplication," he said. "All Muslims put aside disagreements. It is when Allah accepts the worship of the hajjis, their prayers and sacrifices. Muslims everywhere spend four days remembering Allah and his mercy, visiting each other, congratulating each other and praying for one another. It is a time when Muslims pray to Allah that he provide relief, comfort and assistance for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, all over the world."

He also said "the first 10 days of the month of the Hajj (Dhu al-Hijjah), during which the hajj is performed, as the last ten days of the forty days spent by prophet Moses in seclusion on Mt. Sinai, where the glory of Allah was manifested, and he received the Ten Commandments."

In South Charleston, people are invited to the celebration of Eid al-Adha at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Islamic Center of West Virginia. The center is located at the intersection of Kanawha Turnpike and Valley Drive.

"May the peace and blessings of Allah be for all on that day," Daoudi said.