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Charitable Tradition in Transition

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With Ramadan beginning, many Muslims expand acts of kindness as a means of furthering interfaith understanding.

By Michelle Boorstein
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During Islam's sacred month of Ramadan, U.S. Muslims are stepping up holiday charity toward non-Muslims to counter anti-Islamic sentiment since the Sept. 11 attacks, experts said.

Key edicts of Ramadan, which began yesterday at sunset, are to fast and promote good conduct. The devil is said to be shackled, making it easier than during the rest of the year to perform good deeds and give charity.

Although some Muslims have always had a broad interpretation of these tenets, there has been a shift in recent years to look beyond the Muslim community for where one gives. This is the result both of a more mature Muslim American social service infrastructure and of a drive to counter anti-Muslim rhetoric since 2001, experts say.

"For decades, Muslims were internally focused, and I think September 11th accelerated the natural process of becoming more externally focused," said Ihsan Bagby, author of several studies of Muslim worship trends in the United States. "It's not like the impulse to do good is some new idea in Islam; concern for the poor, the weak is throughout the Koran. It's just that Muslims in this country hadn't implemented it very well. Now a wave is starting to form."

Community service events planned in the region during Ramadan include feeding day laborers, fundraising for city shelters and helping to organize nonviolence and interfaith projects.

Discussion about the shift also reflects the enduring question at the heart of Ramadan: How can one best do good? The impact of good deeds is said to be multiplied during Ramadan, which marks the period when the Koran began to be revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

But how? Among local Muslims interviewed, interpretations of good works include political fundraising, prayer and safe driving. This week's editions of Muslim Link, a local Muslim newspaper, noted a new Web site meant to help Muslims remember to do such good deeds as "sponsor an orphan" and "exercise."

When he was growing up, Joshua Salaam remembers, his demeanor would change during Ramadan. He would actively try to avoid gossip -- "even joking about people," Salaam, 33, said of his teenage years in the Midwest and later in the Air Force.

Today he adds a bit to that basic dictate. Although he still experiences a mind-set change during Ramadan, a period when Muslims aim to deepen their spiritual practice, Salaam will also participate in an interfaith event, a walk designed to bring together people of different faiths.

Salaam, a youth leader for the All Dulles Area Mosque Society, a large community center known as ADAMS, said people are reacting to anti-Muslim sentiment since Sept. 11.

"Muslims were asking: How could a whole nation turn on us? The answer is because they didn't know us, they weren't familiar with Islam," he said. "We need to get back that aspect [of Islam] that is neighborly."

Badreldin Fadul, an [Alexandria](#) taxi driver who moved from [Sudan](#) a decade ago, said that during Ramadan, he tries to focus even more on being virtuous.

Fadul, 30, was eating lunch this week with his wife and two cousins at the Lebanese Butcher and Restaurant in [Falls Church](#). Doing "good," they agreed, is more complex in the United States. In heavily Muslim Sudan, everything shuts down for Ramadan, and one can easily extend charity by inviting the unmarried, the poor and travelers into one's home to break the fast at sundown. Here, things are more complex because they know fewer people, and acquaintances are more far-flung.

"We do the best we can," Fadul said.

Lela Martinez, who was grocery shopping at the nearby Halalco, a supermarket-bookstore with many Islam-oriented products, said she made a point during the past two Ramadans to donate or volunteer with her children for a Hurricane Katrina-related cause. The 47-year-old teacher said that when she was growing up in [Fairfax](#), her family would usually donate to the general fund at the mosque.

"It seems like Muslims are coming out into the open more now, seeing ourselves as a force -- like we can make things happen if we get behind a cause," she said.


In the center of the supermarket were piles of boxed dates, the food traditionally used to break the fast at sunset at elaborate dinners called iftars. Shelves were lined with gift boxes of sweets that people bring to one another, and on display were dozens of books about the

Koran, which Muslims are supposed to read during Ramadan.

Mukit Hossain, 47, a telecommunications worker and Muslim activist in [Northern Virginia](#), said holiday charity is deliberately done more publicly because Muslims are eager to build bridges after Sept. 11.

"Which is interesting, because the sayings of the prophet say to do charity discreetly -- but to make it public if it encourages others to be more charitable," he said. "The nature of charity has changed. It was more internal and private before."

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