

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Celebrations of freedom, life and obedience



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This week is celebrated as Holy Week for Christians and Passover or Pesach for Jews. Because of calendar differences, it is not always the case that they occur the same week. Furthermore, it is not always the case that Easter is celebrated in the West on the same date as it is by the Eastern Orthodox Church, which uses the Julian calendar rather than the Gregorian. For example, last year the Western church celebrated Easter on March 25, while Passover began on April 23 and the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrated Easter on May 1. This year, however, all three religious holidays are in the same week. Passover began Monday at sundown, and the Eastern and the Western churches will celebrate Easter this Sunday.

Next month, our Muslim brothers and sisters will celebrate one of their major holidays, with Ramadan beginning on May 27. Also using a lunar calendar, this monthlong period of fasting from sunrise to sunset also varies in date.

More important than the changing dates on the calendar is to recognize what is being celebrated on these religious holidays. The Jewish eight-day celebration of Passover

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commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The highlight is the Seder meal celebrated at the beginning of the weeklong event.

The focal points of the Seder include the eating of matzah, or unleavened bread. This symbolizes that when the Hebrew people were getting ready to leave, there was no time for the bread to rise. The eating of bitter herbs commemorates the bitter experience of the slavery endured by the Israelites. Drinking the four cups of wine celebrates the new freedom that was attained after the exodus. The recitation of the Haggadah is a liturgy required in scripture to tell each generation the account of deliverance. The core narrative of Passover and the Seder meal is the movement from slavery to freedom.

The Christian story celebrated during Holy Week is that of the final days of Jesus, who, after his entry into Jerusalem, celebrated with his disciples the Passover meal, referred to

as the Last Supper by Christians. This was followed by his betrayal, trial, death by crucifixion and Resurrection, which is celebrated on Easter Sunday. The core narrative of Holy Week and Easter is the movement from death to life.

For Muslims, the month of Ramadan is a time of spiritual reflection, prayer and giving to the poor. One of the five pillars of Islam, it is practiced through fasting from sunrise to sunset by refraining from all food and drinking of any liquids. After sunset, the fast is broken by a meal called the iftar. At the conclusion of the month, the Eid al-Fitr is considered one of the major celebrations in Islam. Observance of Ramadan is commanded in the Quran and celebrates the beginning of the revelation of scripture to the prophet Muhammad. The core narrative of Ramadan and Islam is the movement from pride to obedience and submission.

I suggest that while the dates may change from year to year, the basic message of these three important religious observations should be a constant reminder to us all. We can affirm each other's religious traditions and celebrations. We can all learn the importance of these commitments to freedom, life and obedience to God.

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