

Christians need a Ramadan

By [Chad Holtz](#)

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My last year at Duke Divinity I sat in on a panel discussion between Sam Wells, dean of Duke Chapel, and [Abdullah Antepli](#), Muslim chaplain to Duke University. (Imam Antepli also spoke at Wild Goose this summer.) In the course of their discussion about Islam and Christianity, Imam Antepli said something that disturbed me a great deal about my faith. It went something like this:

When I ask a Muslim what makes them a Muslim I get an immediate response which includes things like, I pray 5 times a day, I take care of the sick and the poor, I do not eat this or that, I fast on a regular basis and I observe Ramadan. These practices make me Muslim, they would say.

Imam Antepli then said the thing that damned me and I think most Christians,

When I ask Christians what makes them Christian I usually get an odd look, and an uncomfortable silence ensues. At most, they might say that they believe in Jesus.

Believing in Jesus is just fine, I think we can all agree. But Muslims believe in Jesus. Heck, Jesus said that even demons believe.

Our Christian tendency to fall back on *belief talk* is an indication of just how well the Reformation worked. We swung the pendulum to the other side - completely. And I suspect that Martin Luther would swing to the other side of his grave if he heard our spineless Christian responses to what it means to be Christian.

Today marks the beginning of Ramadan for Muslims. It is the start of a month long period of fasting and prayer and worship. When I lived

in Bahrain back in my unchurched days I watched devout Muslims go as far as spitting their saliva out of their mouths while the sun was out so as to not break their fast from water. It was 130+ degrees outside. I observed this from my air conditioned apartment, sipping my Fiji water bottle while thanking God I was born to a Christian household.

That was 15 years ago. Today, I wish Christians had Ramadan. I think we'd be stronger, more faithful, more joyful, and better off for it.

We are all orienting our lives around something. We are being habituated in ways that either bring life or death, or maybe something in between, like apathy. It might surprise many of us to discover that the first Christians around Jesus called themselves *The Way*. Being a Christian was about living in a certain way that was distinguishable from other ways. It might surprise many of us to discover that *Sharia*, the law for Muslims so often used pejoratively in America, also means *The Way*.

Have we lost our way when we reduce Christianity to a *belief*?

Christianity needs a Ramadan. More precisely, we need to embrace the practices – the ways – that make us unique and distinguishable. We need to become lovers of liturgy again.

That is what Ramadan is, essentially. A form of liturgy. It forms Muslims in a way that fasting, prayer, scripture, eucharist and baptism ought to be shaping us Christians. What a pity that so many churches celebrate eucharist, a central component to Christian worship, monthly at best, quarterly or yearly at worst. I'll never forget the response a professor of mine gave to the objection that frequent eucharist waters down its significance. He asked, "Do you have sex with your spouse only quarterly to maintain its importance?"

Most mornings I post on my Facebook page a status that simply reads "coffee and morning prayer." Each day I use a [prayer book](#) that guides me through my scripture readings for the day and directs my thoughts towards God – if only for 15 minutes. Someone once asked what my motivation was for doing that. Was I trying to convert people

to my religion? Or was I just too lazy to think of something more creative to say? There may be some truth in both of those possibilities, but the best answer I can offer is that it grounds me in a habit that brings me life and I hope (in fact, I know it does) it models for others one way among many ways that we can distinguish ourselves as *Christian*. It would be a very cool thing, I think, to see my Newsfeed filled with “coffee and morning prayer” from the faithful and trying-to-be-faithful among us. And if you must ask, yes, coffee (black) is the only acceptable offering to the Lord early in the morning. Should you pray after 5, a cold AmberBock is also on the approved list.

So, thank you, my Muslim brothers and sisters, for reminding us this Ramadan season that we Christians need to embrace our liturgy – our way – to greater degrees. May we become known increasingly more for the bread and wine we consume at every mass, the widow and orphan we stand beside, the absurd ways we turn the other cheek, the radical ways we forgive, the devotion we have to our scriptures and prayers, and the affection we have for Christ’s body, the Church.

Happy Ramadan, everyone.

(for a fun, satirical piece I wrote last year during Ramadan see: [Face to Face with Evil: My Family Visits an Islamic Community Center](#))

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