

## ‘It is in giving we receive’

**ATLE HETLAND**  
EN ROUTE

**I**t is the eve of Eid ul Azha. It is a busy day for all Muslims, and for others living in Muslim communities. We all prepare for the religious holiday with its universal message. Many travel from the cities and towns where they work or study to reach their hometowns and villages. All want to be together with their closest family members and in the neighborhoods they belong to. This is the trademark of all major religious holidays in all religions, and indeed so for Eid ul Azha.

The holiday is meant to be a time of reflection and prayer, and it is a time when we give importance to sharing and giving. We focus on family, other household members, and the needy in society. That is a beautiful and essential teaching; it is a reminder to all of us, not the least in our more and more materialistic time.

Eid ul Azha reminds us of how important it is not only to have the right relationship with God, but as important, to have the right relationship with fellow human beings. It is always about both, faith and deeds, in Islam and all religions.

When we share with others, we should not only think of money, meat, other food, clothes and other physical gifts, although that too is important. But we should also include as gifts the sharing our time and thoughts, showing of concern and empathy for others, and simply listen to those who want to talk to us or tell us something.

We may be able to give advice and help others so that it ‘lightens their burden’ even if we have little worldly wealth to offer. Sometimes, we cannot afford to give expensive gifts or direct, material help to others. At other times, we need help ourselves, in material or in non-material ways. We should always share of what we have, and we should let others share with us from what they have. Even poor people may share with rich people of their wisdom and warmth. Their gifts may be invaluable to the receivers.

To give and receive are basic principles in all human relations. In religions it is underlined with commandments and advice for how to live with one another. In the Bible, it is stated that ‘to those much has been given, much will be expected’. But again, it is not only the gifted, wealthy and rich that have something to share; we all do. And if we have little, or think we have little, we share from what we have, and we can let others share with us. Maybe it is more difficult to receive than to give? Maybe we are too proud and vain to show that we need the help of others?

The spirit of Eid ul Azha is first of all at individual, family and community levels. Yet, as with all key religious concepts, Eid does also have consequences at the broad societal level, even global level. And Eid is a reminder to us about equality within and between countries. Therefore, Eid ul Azha becomes important politically, too.

This year, the refugee situation in Europe is particularly topical. Most people who become refugees do so because of wars and unbearable conditions in the sending countries. People leave what they cherish to seek safety and a better life elsewhere, temporarily or permanently. In our hearts, we all know that refugees should be welcomed and helped when they come to other lands. Dignity must always be maintained. Alas, humanitarian crises are often situations of humiliation. Host countries often ignore to provide of psychological and other trauma healing, leaving it to be handled by the refugees themselves, not professional health workers. Protection, shelter and food are not enough.

This year, the refugee and migration crisis in Europe is more massive than before. Yet, we should have seen it coming for long, and we should have done much more to help people before they feel forced to flee, and to receive them when they knock on the doors of the peaceful and rich European countries. From a moral perspective and in the spirit of Eid ul Azha, the European countries and people must do more to find solutions for refugees and economic migrants. The distinction is often blurred. The wealthy Europeans must be willing to share with others; they have more than they need and must treat others fairly.

Besides, the number of refugees seems larger than it is, remembering that Europe has about half a billion people, and as a percentage, the refugees are after all relatively few. And if the most advanced and richest countries in the world cannot meet the challenges, it is more for lack of will and old mindsets than for ability. Poorer developing countries manage to receive larger numbers of refugees, both in actual numbers and as percentage of their populations. That also includes Pakistan, which has hosted up to 7 million Afghan refugees – when the government and poor hosts welcomed poor neighbours.

Besides, after having received help at the initial stages, refugees, too, contribute to the host country's development. We talk little about that and we don't carry out research to measure costs and benefits of refugees to the host country. We also don't measure the loss to the home country of refugees and other migrants leaving.

In the spirit of faith, the spirit of Eid ul Azha, Pope Francis repeatedly takes up important issues in our time, and issues that are important in people's everyday lives. This week, he has also done so on his travel to Cuba and USA. And then, we notice that current issues, even everyday issues, have eternal dimensions, too.

Pope Francis has said that one of his most favorite films is 'Babette's Feast', based on a short story by the Danish writer Karen Blixen from 1958. The film is about a poor woman who receives a large sum of money in a lottery and then spends it all on an extravagant feast for her pious fellow villagers, some of them refugees. In the end, after the feast, they are all equal again; they all depend on each other in a life of sharing life's sunny and rainy days. The Pope has said that he has understanding for the illogical, yet human, behavior of Babette – to spend all the money extravagantly. We should perhaps not always be logical and correct, calculate life's issues in gains and losses in monetary terms; we should also include all the other dimensions in our relations with fellow human beings. Maybe the illogical make us more human; better at understanding each other and help carry each others' burdens?

At Eid ul Azha, we must give and receive in the right spirit, without thinking of what benefits ourselves, what returns we may gain, how usefulness it will be for our profit and loss in business or otherwise. We must be selfless, sometimes even illogical.

The title of my column today is, 'It is in giving we receive', a quote from St. Francis of Assisi, a devote believer in the 12<sup>th</sup> century from a rich background, who chose poverty and service to God and fellow human beings. Yes, when we give we receive, not always in worldly necessities, or gold and glitter, but in invisible, intangible and deeper riches that last forever.

On this year's Eid ul Azha, let us again try to do what we can to make the holiday what it is meant to be, for ourselves and for others, and for our relationship with God Allah. We should try to do our best; that is all we can do.

*Dear reader, may I wish you Eid Mubarak.*

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.