

Fasting in Islam and Christianity

“Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those who went before you so that you may be God-conscious.” So says the Qur'an as an introduction to fasting in Islam (Q. 2:183) and, of course, amongst “those who went before” are the Jews and Christians.

Islam operates on a lunar calendar comprising twelve months with each new month beginning with the sighting of the new moon. A lunar month is technically 29.5 days long, but in practice each month is either twenty-nine or thirty days long, depending on when the new moon is sighted. This means that a lunar year is 354 days long, thus eleven days shorter than a solar year. Any event timed according to the lunar calendar advances by approximately eleven days each year when compared to the solar calendar. This means that the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, called Ramadan, moves through the seasons of the year. For the next few years Ramadan will coincide with the Christian season of Lent.

Many people in contemporary society know the words Ramadan and Lent and perhaps know a little about what is involved and why, but it is worth exploring the depths of these practices to see what they might have to offer to humankind as a whole. The Muslim fast during the month of Ramadan is obligatory for all adult Muslim men and women provided that it is not injurious to their health or they are not exempt in some other way. In terms of physical fasting, it requires that Muslims do not eat, drink, or engage in sexual activities from before dawn (first light) until after the sun has set, every day during the month. There is much more to the observance of Ramadan than just this physical fasting as we will explore.

The Christian season of Lent is generally understood in the West as the forty-day period, beginning on Ash Wednesday and leading up to the celebration of Easter. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Great Fast, as it is called, begins seven weeks before Easter. It is one of the four widely observed fasts in the Eastern tradition: the Apostles' Fast from one week after Pentecost until the feast of Saints Peter and Paul on 29th June, the Koimesis Fast from 1st to 14th August, commemorating the role of the Virgin Mary as the God-bearer (*Theotokos*) culminating on the 15th in the feast of her Dormition (known in the West as the feast of the Assumption), and the Christmas Fast from 15th November to 24th December. This Eastern tradition has many more minor fasts, indeed in the 9th to 14th centuries the number of fast days in the year was in the range 185-210, so the number is considerably reduced today. From this pattern, we can see that one of the reasons behind Christian fasting is a spiritual and physical preparation for an important celebration. The great festival at the end of the fast gives the importance to the fast itself.

Christianity grew out from Judaism, and Islam recognises Judaism as the religion based on the earlier revelation sent to Moses. The principal fast day in Judaism is the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which is observed by a twenty-five-hour total fast from just before sunset at the start of the Day until nightfall after the next day has begun. It is a commandment from God (Leviticus 16:29-31) during which Jews are to recall their sins and offences of the past year and seek God's forgiveness. This spirit of reflection on one's life and seeking forgiveness from God for sins that have been committed, whether by omission or commission, is a common theme also in the Muslim and Christian fasts of Ramadan and Lent.

Another fast day that has come into Jewish observance is that held on the 9th of the month Av. This commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, on the first occasion in 587_{BCE} and on the second in 70_{CE}. This sense of fasting to express sorrow for something that has passed, as can also be seen in the mourning rites in Judaism, can also be observed in the other two faiths.

The three principal good works of Judaism, prayer, almsgiving, and fasting, also find their place in the observance of fasting in Islam and Christianity. Fasting is a way of intensifying prayer; the practices of prayer and fasting are often found linked in the Bible (for example, Nehemiah 1:4-11). During the days, and especially the nights, of Ramadan Muslims are to be found making additional prayers, either alone or in congregation. The fasting month is a time of heightened spirituality, seeking to draw closer to God and thus to conform one's life more closely in obedience to the divine will. In this context, we can mention the practice of secluding oneself in silent study and meditation in a mosque during the last ten days of the month (*i'tikaf*). The season of Lent for Christians is also marked by more fervent prayer, alone and in congregational services. Similarly, prayer and fasting raises one's awareness of the plight of others and thus prompts additional acts of charity and giving alms to those in need. Special collections take place in some Christian churches to relieve the suffering of those in need around the world. Many Muslims, during this month, will observe the practice of calculating their annual payments of *zakat* or *khums*, to make money circulate from those who have more than they need to those who are in need.

Before a Muslim begins any major action, it is customary silently to declare one's intention to God. This is a requirement for the month of Ramadan; it is a duty owed to God and therefore the intention (*niyya*) should be clear. Fasting is not about torture and doing harm to oneself, rather it is an act of self-discipline, developing the moral and physical courage to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. Those who are too young or too old, those sick or traveling, pregnant women and nursing mothers do not fast, although some, like those who travelled for a few days, will catch up on missed days later. Ramadan increases one's awareness of the hunger and thirst that millions of people experience every day, not by choice but through lack of food and clean water. We are reminded of our dependence on God and on those things that lie beyond our control, like sunshine and rain. By breaking the normal daily routine for one month of the year, Muslims learn not to become creatures of habit and slaves to their desires. In the same way, for people of faith, fasting can be a way to seek to fight against temptation when one feels an attraction to something that would be sinful. Both Muslim and Christian counsellors might, for example, recommend fasting to develop self-control to people tempted to illicit sexual relations.

Although for Muslims the precise details of fasting are clearly established in the Qur'an (Q. 2:183-187), things are not so clear-cut for Christians. Over the centuries, various Christian churches have developed their own emphases and traditions. For many Christians, the season of Lent will be observed by removing certain pleasurable foods from the diet, or similar abstention from something good and enjoyable. For others, it will mean observing a 'fasting diet,' in which certain classes of food will be excluded altogether. These might be some or all of the following: meat, fish, dairy products, wine, and olive oil. Some will follow the practice of abstaining from food during the day and then having an austere meal at sunset. In the Eastern tradition, days of heightened commemoration, such as Good Friday, will be observed by a total fast. There is no suggestion in either religion that food,

drink and sex are somehow bad or impure, rather they are some of the most powerful urges that we have as human beings and so, if we can take control of them during the fasting periods, we will grow in that self-control that characterises being human.

The heightened sense of ourselves as both spiritual and physical beings has an impact on the positive things that people are led to do during these periods of more intense awareness of God. People might make an effort to seek out and visit those who are lonely, housebound, sick or in any other need. This could be seen as a practical form of charity during this time. The fasting season is a time for taking stock of one's life. Do I discharge adequately my duties to my family, my community, and the society in which I live? Do I earn my money in a way that builds up society or that exploits others? It is a good time to review one's spending budget; where does all my money go? Do I gossip or tell lies? Do I give enough time to prayer and study?

We can see two forms of fasting in both faiths: collective and individual. By the whole community fasting at the same time during Ramadan or Lent, the bonds which bind them together will be strengthened and thus individuals will be supported to defend their deeper desires against the passing temptations of the moment. In Muslim societies the pattern of life will be altered during Ramadan so that people might go to work early in the morning and rest in the afternoon. Shops and businesses also might close during the afternoon and then open again after the end of the fasting day. It was the pious practice in some schools of Judaism to fast for two days each week, on Mondays and Thursdays. This practice of individual fasting passed over into early Christianity when Wednesdays and Fridays were observed as fast days. Some Muslims, seeking to model their lives on that of the Prophet Muhammad, will follow his practice of fasting on certain days each week or month, or during certain months of the year. Someone might fast as a way of making recompense having broken an oath (Q. 5:89). Those who are seeking guidance from God in some particular matter might observe a period of fasting (Daniel 9:3 or the practice of *istikhara* for Muslims). We read of Christians fasting before being sent out on a mission (Acts of the Apostles 13:2-3) or before baptism (Acts of the Apostles 9:9) and this was taken over by the early Christian practice of fasting before receiving communion. The personal nature of such individual fasts is stressed in the gospel of Matthew (6:17-18) where people are counselled not to let their outer appearance manifest the fact that they are fasting but rather to make it part of a personal relationship between the individual and God.

It was during the month of Ramadan in the year 610CE that the first revelation of the Qur'an took place. This is commemorated on Lailat al-Qadr, the Night of Power or Destiny. This occurs on one of the odd-numbered nights in the last ten days of the month. This makes Ramadan supremely the Month of the Qur'an. The Qur'an has been divided into thirty sections so that one section is recited, read, or studied on each of the nights during the month. Sunni Muslims will combine this recitation with communal prayers (*tarawih*) each night during Ramadan. The Shi'a attend communal recitations and pray privately. It has become customary amongst some Christians to establish study groups during Lent working on a particular book of the Bible or on a book by a contemporary author devoted to a particular theme. Many Christians will dedicate themselves to regular reading and study of scripture during this period.

Christians are acutely aware that salvation is not something that can be earned or merited through one's own actions alone. Salvation is ultimately the free gift of God which cannot be demanded but for which one can earnestly hope; through God's grace, one can dispose oneself to receive it. The Western Christian Reformers of the 16th century were against obligatory fasting periods because of their perceived association with somehow earning merit from God, nevertheless certain pious practices of fasting were retained. This means that some Christians, who come from this Reformed tradition, may not observe collective periods of fasting at all.

For Muslims the goal of Ramadan can be summarised as to grow in *taqwa*, the consciousness of the presence of God, the desire to grow closer to God through obedience to God's commands, and to express that faith, consciousness, and closeness through actions that will make the individual, society, and indeed the whole world more God-centred and thus in harmony with God and the whole of creation. The first day of the month after Ramadan is observed as a festival day of prayer, celebration, gathering and enjoyment, especially for children; it is called 'Id al-Fitr (the Festival of Fast-breaking).

The Christian season of Lent, which is timed as the season of preparation for Easter, must always be understood in that context. Easter is the supreme sign, based on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, of the potential that we have as human beings, namely to share now life in union with God that will be fully realised after our own death and resurrection. Thus, Lent is part of that transformative process made possible by Easter. The practice of turning inwards during this time, to reflect on one's own life and deepen one's prayer relationship with God, leads to a fuller participation in this ultimate reality. The very word Lent itself comes from the Old English, meaning 'to lengthen.' Lent takes place, in the northern hemisphere, at the time of spring and thus the lengthening of the hours of daylight and the awakening of the world of nature to new life. For Christians Lent is a time of lengthening, broadening and seeking to grasp the expanded horizon, which is the message of Easter. It is a time of glimpsing the brilliant white light of the glory of God, however veiled it may still be, yearning for it, and preparing the ground for the grace of God, already at work in our lives, to complete the transformation that Easter promises.

More detail on Ramadan can be found on www.chrishewer.org then click on the UI Course, Series II: Standing before God, Part 4 "The discipline of fasting."