

Fasting

Christian Fasting

Dr. Peter Feldmeier

Biblical Foundations of Fasting

Fasting from eating and abstinence from certain foods has a long and venerable history in Judaism and Christianity. While the Mosaic Law established only the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) as a fast day (Lv 16:29-34; Nm 29:7), fasting is widely witnessed in the Old Testament as providing a certain spiritual force to one's prayers or intensity to one's interior life. The most common reasons for fasting include *repentance* (1 Sam 7:6; Joel 1:14; Jon 3:5-9), *supplication* in time of calamity (Judg 2:26; 2 Chr 20:3-4; Ezra 8:21-23), *mourning* (1 Sam 21:13; 2 Sam 1:12), and as a *spiritual preparation* for an undertaking (1 Sam 14:24).

In the New Testament we see the same appreciation for fasting, and for many of the same reasons. In preparation for his public ministry, Jesus fasted for forty days and nights (Mt 4:2; Lk 4:2). Jesus also anticipated that his disciples would fast (Mt 6:16-18; 9:14-15; Mk 2:20). Indeed Paul fasted in preparation for his baptism (Acts 9:9) and he and Barnabas fasted as they selected and commissioned elders in newly formed churches (Acts 13:3; 14:23).

The principle references to fasting in Jesus' teachings are associated with authentic repentance. Because of this, Jesus, like the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works of sackcloth, ashes, and mortification, but principally at the mortification of the heart. Without this, such exterior forms of penance remain sterile at best and an expression of religious hypocrisy at worse (cf. Joel 2:12-13; Isa 1:16-17; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). Nonetheless, with right attitude, fasting did express true devotion (Lk 2:37). Perhaps Matthew 6:1-18 best represents Jesus' integrated view on the three pillars of Jewish Piety, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. They are to be done for interior conversion with an emphasis on humility (cf. Lk 18:9-14).

History of Fasting

Given that fasting was grounded in Jewish religious practice and continued through the apostolic period, the early church practiced fasting and abstinence as a standard part of its life. In early centuries regularly weekly fasts were practiced on Wednesdays and Fridays, with Friday being particularly poignant as the commemorative day in which the Lord died. By 400 C.E., Saturday had replaced Wednesday in the Western church. The degree of fasting, from absolute to partial, varied tremendously throughout the both East and West.

The longest period of fasting came during the forty days of Lent, which is a time of purification and preparation for celebrating Easter with more intensive spiritual practices. In addition, the West began to practice fasting before great feasts, from the night before until the celebration of the feast the next day. By the eighth century, the Eastern church, in addition to the forty days fasting in Lent, added three other periods of fast: the *Lent of the holy Apostles* (June 16-28); *Mary's Lent* (August 1-14); and the *Lent before Christmas* (November 15-December 24).

Fasting not only meant observing the requirement of local church custom in terms of the quantity of food and time it could be eaten, but also abstinence from certain types of food, particularly meat and dairy products. Days of fasting were thus days of abstinence, although other days might be marked for the observance of abstinence alone. For example, Orthodox Christians typically abstain from meat and dairy throughout Lent, and some practice *xerophagy*, the eating of dry food only.

Historically, there has always been a close relationship between fasting and almsgiving. The *Shepherd of Hermas* calls the one fasting to give to the poor what would have been personally spent on food (3.5.3). Origen agreed: fasting "nourishes the poor" (*Homily on Leviticus* 10.2). Chrysostom argued that it failed to be fasting unless there was almsgiving connected to it (*Homily on Matthew* 77.6). Augustine even went further by teaching that fasting without giving what was saved to the poor literally represented avarice (*Sermon* 208).

Fasting was widely practiced in the Middle Ages, and severely so by some ascetical movements, e.g., Franciscans and the Poor Clare Sisters. It has been shown to have a particularly important symbolic expression for women, the most famous of whom were visionaries. This extraordinary expression of self-deprivation by some was typically aligned also with a great Eucharistic devotion as well as a desire to identify with the Passion of Christ, another Medieval focus.

Protestants, in order to avoid legalism and hints of *works righteousness*, have rejected fasting as a church mandate. This, however did not mean that pious Protestants in the Reformation and Modern periods did not fast or recommend fasting. It can be found in many venerable witnesses, notably Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield.

Modern Church

While modern fasting practices are not typically demanding in Christianity, it still remains part of Christian life. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians legislate fasting and other communities, such as the Anglican Communion and the United Methodist Church, formally encourage its use during Advent and Lent. Fasting for Evangelical Christians, has gained in popularity recently, with particular attention paid toward its historic association with petitionary prayer. It is also recommended in Evangelical circles as a direct challenge to popular culture's consumerism. In Catholicism, obligatory fasting was reorganized in 1966 by Pope Paul VI's apostolic

constitution *Peinitemini*. Here he recommended that forms of fasting be associated with the local social and economic conditions and be integrated with prayer and works of charity.

In mainstream Christianity, more than ever fasting is likely to be aligned to the patristic association between fasting and almsgiving. Specifically, it has been aligned with solidarity with the world's hungry. Such initiatives as *Operation Rice Bowl* or *The Oxfam Fast* as well as the *Lutheran Campaign of Prayer, Fasting, and Vigils* emphasize this. These church sponsored initiatives also become consciousness raising expressions as well. And thus fasting strengthens the desire to help the poor by restructuring the distribution of the world's goods and teaches one to use the earth's resources with care and respect.

In summary, fasting has been and continues to be understood as an outward symbol of the soul's hunger and thirst for holiness. It frees the soul from its attachments so as to be more intimately available to God and neighbor.

Fasting in Islam

By Dr. Adil Ozdemir

Fasting is a form of worship observed worldwide by Muslims regardless of theological or political differences in the Islamic household. It is like prayer, one of the five pillars of Islam (Bukhari Vol. 1, pp.130-1). Fasting (*sawn or siyam*) is abstinence from eating, drinking, and sexual pleasures from before dawn to sunset during the whole lunar month of Ramadan. It is based on the Quranic commandment "It is written on you to fast as it was written on those before you in hope that you be saved" (2/183). Considered as a ritual, fasting is accepted as a bodily form of obligatory worship which is incumbent on every believer, male and female, beginning at the age of twelve. In addition to the individual obligation of fasting during the month of Ramadan, there are additional days during the year when the pious Muslims observe fasting. The prophet said that during the month of Ramadan the devil is chained and the blessings abound. He said "It is a month of mercy (*rahma*) and blessings (*beraqah*) and forgiveness (*magfirah*) or release from sins" (....). Fasting as experienced by Muslims worldwide has a purifying effect on the individual, and is a shield for the community to protect it from social evils. Every year Muslims during the month of Ramadan grow in faith, developing virtues of hospitality, generosity, patience, meekness, humility, sacrifice and altruism. They learn to feel their limitations grow in empathy for the needy, the destitute and the unfortunate. Fasting is a huge contribution to the solidarity of the believing community sharpening the senses of justice and peace in every individual Muslim.

As a religious requirement for every healthy, sane Muslim over the age of puberty, fasting starts before dawn with a light meal (*sahur*) as a breakfast, and it ends at sunset with a meal called (*iftar*). Observation of the month of Ramadan is free from legalism and strict ritualism in that there are exemptions for the traveler, the sick, the elderly, the nursing

women and for the children. Even for the healthy resident there are alternative make-ups in cases of forgetfulness or breaking the fast by mistake.

Fasting for Muslims is a command of Allah and an obligatory duty of the believer toward Allah. It is actually surrender to Allah, expressed in abstinence mainly from the food, drink, and sex from sunrise to sunset. The purpose of it according to the Qur'an is *taqwa*: "O you believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you. so that you may be God-fearing (*la'allakum tattaquuna*)"2/183. *Taqwa* is explained as God consciousness or God orientedness. As an expression of surrender it is done for the pleasure of God, as a closeness and as an obedience to Him. Besides being a religious obligation, it is also an act of gratitude (*shukr*), a repentance for sins committed. It can also be of atoning efficacy, and be a compensation for breaking an oath, for intentional and unintentional breaking of fasting, or a compensation for violation of any rule at the pilgrimage.

In modern times the feelings of generosity overflows to the streets in all quarters of the Islamic world to feed the poor so that the feeling of the presence of the divine generosity is felt throughout the world. Both mayors and the affluent serve *iftar* meals for the poor every evening during Ramadan. None is left hungry. People of fame such as movie stars and celebrities apply to the municipalities to organize *iftars* for the poor. This is in addition to the Muslim custom that the poor in each neighborhood and travelers are always hosted at houses to eat together with the hosting family. Crimes decrease during the month of Ramadan, and joy penetrates the *ummah*. The month of fasting ends with three days of feasting which begins in the morning with yearly special prayers of festival accompanied by extra magnifications of God. These three days are reserved for visiting the dead, the elderly, relatives, neighbors, friends, to renew kinship, and to strengthen family ties. It is a time of reconciliation and making peace. Even in modern times the peaceful atmosphere created by fasting echoes in the wider political and social arena easing political tension and making competition gentler.

Areas of Agreement

Both Christianity and Islam enjoin and practice fasting. In both religions, the emphasis is on fasting and abstinence as spiritual disciplines which free the self from attachments to material things and focus attention on God (God-consciousness). In both religions also, fasting is connected with almsgiving. For Christians, Lent is a time for fasting but also for distributing alms and charity to the poor. The idea is that what is saved in fasting be given to the poor. In Islam, the month of Ramadan is a time of severe fasting--Muslims eat and drink nothing during the hours of daylight--but it also is a time for charity and gifts for the poor. Finally, in both traditions, fasting is associated with penance.

Areas of Disagreement:

While both religions practice fasting, the requirement for fasting is more rigorous in Islam than in Christianity. Fasting from all food and drink during the month of Ramadan, especially if that month falls in the summer when the days are long, is extremely

demanding. Furthermore, pious Muslims abstain from alcohol, pork, and certain other foods all their lives. There is no such requirement in most Christian denominations; though some contemporary Protestant churches do prohibit drinking alcohol.

More than in Islam, in Judaism and Christianity fasting is associated with repentance, supplication, and petitionary prayer. This aspect of fasting is especially strong in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the book of Jonah, for example, Jonah preached in Nineveh: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown." In response, the people of Nineveh proclaimed a fast of repentance and supplication, and the Lord spared the city.

Points for Discussion:

Generally, fasting seems to be more important in Islam than in Christianity. Like prayer, it has been an important means of "tuning into God," in Islam, but also in most world religious traditions. Fasting was important in Judaism, in the New Testament (Jesus fasted), in early, ancient, and medieval Christianity. But it is not now a major feature of Christian practice (except perhaps in Eastern Orthodoxy). Thus Muslim emphasis on fasting might challenge Christians to reexamine the importance of fasting in their own traditions. This is all the more true since many Christian leaders, especially Pope John Paul II, have stressed that Christians need to challenge modern consumerism. A resurgence in the importance of fasting by Christians would be an important countercultural sign in today's consumerist societies. Finally, we seem to be entering a period of resource scarcity. Petroleum reserves, water, soil, and minerals, are all declining. The next generation is likely to be far more conscious of resource scarcity than we. Fasting would be an appropriate religious response in this period of scarcity.