

Sawm (Fasting)

FASTING is an old religious custom. It was practiced by lay persons and clergy in ancient religions, as well as by Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. Though its purposes differed from religion to religion, there was general agreement that fasting was a self-preparation for communion with divinity.

Islam has prescribed for all healthy adult Muslims a rigorous fast: total abstention from food, drink and sex from dawn to sunset during every day of the month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the lunar year. The body may not partake of anything in any way or contact another of the opposite sex without breaking the fast. Exempted from this duty are children, persons suffering from sickness, or undergoing travel. In such cases, the exempted person was not to forego the fast but to postpone it to another, more healthy or restful time before recurrence of the following Ramadan.

Long before Islam, the month of Ramadan was regarded by the Arabs as a holy month. Its occasion imposed upon them the proscription of war and hunting, and brought about an uninterrupted peace during which travel and movement of goods across the desert were safe from attack by anyone or any tribe. The Arabs reckoned Ramadan as the month of spiritual stocktaking. Throughout its duration, they were

especially keen to please, to settle old debts and disputes, to do good to their neighbors. The more morally sensitive natures among them underwent a retreat within the temple, or into their homes, in order not to disturb their concentration and meditation. Before his commission as Prophet, Muhammad was in the habit of retreating during Ramadan to Hira, a cave outside of Makkah, where he would spend several days in meditation. His wife used to send him a daily provision with a servant, knowing that her husband was devoting himself exclusively to worship.

Islam continued the tradition of dedicating the month of Ramadan to religious pursuits. Besides the fast, the Islamic tradition regarded moral and religious action during Ramadan as especially meritorious, and urged Muslims to increase their service to God during the month. It was during Ramadan that Muhammad received his first revelation.

Islam assigned to fasting two purposes; self-discipline and commiseration with the hungry of the earth. We have seen that Islam repudiates self-mortification and asceticism. In consequence, it cannot regard fasting as an ascetic self-denial valuable in and for itself or when done for the sake of God. For Islam does not believe that righteousness requires that mankind deny itself. God wishes for mankind to be free, healthy, fulfilled and happy. As philosophers might put it, going to the dentist is certainly a painful experience. One does not perform it for its own sake without assuming that suffering is the end of human life. One performs it willingly, however, if it is taken to lead to the realization of the purpose of health and well being which are the opposite of suffering. Accordingly, there is no denying that fasting is a hardship, and the question is, to what purpose did Islam impose it? It is in this purpose that the meaning of Ramadan must be sought.

Self-discipline through fasting is a religiously novel idea. Food and sex, which are the pivotal instincts of life, and whose satisfaction is a capital requirement of any social order, are precisely the most sensitive areas of human life. No threat to any other area could be more central or dangerous, more prone to alert man's consciousness in full, except the threat of death itself. Prohibition of food and sex does constitute such threat, the former to individual life and the latter to group life. Deliberate abstinence from food and sex stirs up the consciousness of

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imminent death to both the individual and the group, and provides ample opportunity to mobilize consciousness and launch it into combat, in defense of life.

Islam has prescribed total abstinence from food and sex from dawn to sunset precisely in order to stir up consciousness, to think of life and death, and to train the individual to resist the threat. The threat to individual and group life must be resisted; and the Muslim must be taught and trained in the art of resistance. Patience, forbearance, perseverance, steadfastness in suffering and privation, these are the qualities Islam seeks to cultivate through fasting. Conversely, the areas of food and sex are man's weakest spots as far as morality and righteousness are concerned. Almost all vice and immorality find their way into the world through these two avenues. To learn how to block them in the face of immoral use, to fortify the individual against temptation and make one's moral house impregnable through them, is equally the purpose of Islam.

For these reasons, Islam looks upon fasting as the best exercise in the art of self-mastery and discipline. To make the exercise pedagogically fruitful, Islam prescribed that the fast be broken promptly at sunset, even before the performance of the sunset salah. That is why Islam regarded every day in Ramadan as a fresh exercise or trial which, if carried successfully to sunset, may be ended with celebration, food and joy, that the abstinence and hence the exercise may be started all over again at dawn, the next day. A little indulgence at night, the Legislator seems to have thought, might even make the daytime abstinence more effective as an exercise in self-mastery than continuous denial which can quickly become habitual and hence of diluted effect. The alternation of abstinence and indulgence every day and night is far more forceful and effective.

Throughout the Muslim World, the month of Ramadan is received with joy. People uphold the fast and literally change their countenances. No time is better for articulating the social bond uniting Muslim to Muslim. At night, Muslim towns and villages are alive with togetherness and merrymaking. Lest the latter get out of hand and to keep the moral-religious lesson ever present to consciousness, Islam prescribed a special salah for the nights of Ramadan, namely, *tarāwīḥ*.

Ideally this salah, which is at least as long as all the *ṣalawāt* (plural of salah) of the day, would involve the recitation of the whole Qur'an in successive parts during the 29 or 30 days of the month.

The end of Ramadan is a feast called *ʿId al-Fitr* (feast of the breaking of the fast) which Muslims celebrate in one congregational salah in the first morning after Ramadan, and with gifts, visits with relatives and friends, food and joyful events. New clothing for young and old is imperative for salah of the *ʿId al-Fitr*, which is to be held in as few places as possible in order to congregate together the greatest possible number of Muslims. The joy of the feast is a culmination of moral success at the daily fast of the previous month. If the trial of the month of Ramadan has been a success in its totality, the feast is well deserved. The Muslim would have emerged “proven” in his ability to bend the pivotal forces of nature, the instincts for food and sex, to the demands of morality and religion. After a successful Ramadan, the Muslim must feel more capable and more ready to undertake any duty, any task. Like a bow, he has become more taut for the arrow.

The second purpose of fasting is commiseration with the hungry, the deprived of the earth. There is no teacher more eloquent or effective than experience. Privation is without doubt humanity's constant and greatest affliction. To undertake the fast of Ramadan is to empathize in live manner with the deprived everywhere. To enhance this lesson, Islam recommended the feeding of the neighbor, especially the poor, every day of Ramadan. It declared Ramadan the month of charity, of altruism, of neighborly love and kindness. It prescribed, as personal atonement, the feeding of sixty men for every day of Ramadan on which the fast is broken deliberately; and of two men in addition to making up the fast on other days if the fast was broken legitimately. Finally, it prescribed that no Muslim may attend the *ʿId al-Fitr* salah unless he has extended his charity to the poor the previous night. This is *zakāt al-ḥiṭr* (charity of fast-ending). Its amount is prescribed to be the equivalent of two meals on behalf of every member of the household. This measure helped to bring the joys of the feast to the poor and hungry as well.

This philosophy of fasting in Islam illustrates Islam's humanism and world-affirmation. Fasting, the art of self-denial *par excellence*, practiced

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by the ascetics of all religions, has here been transformed into an instrument of self-mastery, the better to conduct human life in its will and striving for the world and for life, but raised to higher levels of nobility and righteousness. The bitterness of denial, the morbidness of self-mortification, the antagonism to life, to space, to time and this world of men and women, of food and sex, are all wiped out in the Islamic experience. From his fast, the Muslim emerges refined and cleansed, the better to immerse himself in the discharge of his vicegerency in God's creation.