

MUSLIMS AND THE QUESTION OF FASTING

THE QUESTION OF FASTING

What is the attitude of Muslims to fasting? This leaflet provides an introductory answer to this question. What follows may also suggest some ideas for stimulating inter-faith dialogue about a subject which continues to play an integral part in the lives of 'the People of the Book'. This is the phrase used by Muslims when speaking of Christians and Jews as well as themselves, all of whom consider themselves to be the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

Why Fast?

In a secular society such as ours the surprise is not that people do *not* fast (except to improve their appearance and health) but that anyone should feel obliged to fast *at all* for religious reasons. For Jews living at the time of Jesus fasting was one of many carefully regulated religious duties. Failure to fast at the appropriate times was noted with disapprobation. On one occasion (recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke 5.33ff) representatives of Jewish religious authority put Jesus on the spot. They approached him and said: 'The disciples of John [the Baptist] fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.' The implication was clear enough. The reply of Jesus deflected the criticism: 'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them'? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and

then they will fast in those days.' Some six centuries later fasting was also prescribed for Muslims during the month of *Ramadan*.

Fasting during the month of *Ramadan*

The annual period of fasting during the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar is one of the five 'Pillars', or religious duties, of *Islam*. The month of *Ramadan* in the lunar Islamic calendar retrogresses through the seasons of the solar calendar in a cycle of 34 years. This is because the Islamic lunar year, consisting of 354 days, is eleven days shorter than the solar year. Fasting during the month of *Ramadan* is obligatory for all adult Muslims unless there are special circumstances, for which dispensation is permitted. Even so, this dispensation is temporary. Those who do not fast at the prescribed time are expected to make up for the loss when their circumstances allow. Those who wilfully ignore the obligation to fast will pay the penalty for disobedience – not just in this life, when they fail to take part in an activity of spiritual cleansing that unites members of the Islamic community, but also when the Day of Judgment comes. One who denies the obligatory Fast is called an unbeliever (*kafir*).

The Value of Fasting during *Ramadan*

The Arabic word for the Fast during the month of *Ramadan* is *sawm*, or alternatively, *siyam*. It derives from a root which expresses the notion of 'being at rest'. To be in this state is to be prepared for a prolonged 30-day

spiritual exercise, by means of which the state of one's relationship with God and other members of the Islamic community may be seriously considered. This period is one of self-denial and abstinence, undertaken for the specific purpose of concentrating on what it means to be a Muslim. *Ramadan* provides Muslims with prescribed and regulated times of the day in which they can 'withhold themselves' from anything that might distract them from that purpose; for example, from unconsidered and frivolous speech, from eating, from drinking, from sexual intercourse. Uncontrolled and excessive fasting, as a sign of voluntary self-mortification, is not encouraged. The month of fasting begins with the first appearance of the new moon. It ends some 30 days later when the next new moon is observed. Note that it is the actual observation of the new moon which officially begins and ends the fast. After the days of fasting there comes the *Festival of the Breaking of the Fast* (*id al fitr*).

The validity of fasting is determined by the authenticity of the act of personal volition. It is the *intention* of the Muslim that counts. A perfunctory, mechanical, repetition of the formula of intent does not suffice. The *external* observation of the Fast will not serve. An Islamic Tradition states that if a Muslim fails to bear witness to falsehood, or continues to act falsely, then it means nothing to God that such a person abstains from eating and drinking during the prescribed season of fasting. Fasting is designed to renew faith and to strengthen Islamic action. It is to assist Muslims to free themselves from worldly thoughts and habits, to distance themselves from what is ephemeral, and to help them to subject their bodily needs to the discipline of self-denial. Muslims expect that fasting will purify the soul and give them the strength to conquer evil. During *Ramadan* specially chosen passages from the *Qur'an* (the Koran) are recited.

The practice of fasting for religious reasons

was known in pre-Islamic Arabia before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632 AD). He himself had withdrawn into the desert for fasting and meditation before he received the call to be the Apostle of God in 610 AD. In that year, in the night of the 27th of the month of *Ramadan* (the *lailat al-qadr*, 'the Night of Power'), Muhammad received the first of the revelations of the *Qur'an* (that is to say, the verses of *surah*, 'chapter', 96.1-5) from the Angel *Jibril* (Gabriel).¹ The place where he experienced this encounter was in the hills above Mecca. Fasting as a religious duty for Muslims was introduced by Muhammad when the first *ummah* (the Islamic community) was established in Medina. It was there, in the decade AD 622-32 (AH 1-10)² that Muslims came into close contact with Jews. Muhammad tried to enlist their help in order to strengthen his campaign against the people of Mecca, who had rejected his mission. In order to win the support of the Jews, he and the members of the Medinan Islamic community kept the '*Ashura*' voluntary fast day, which was associated with the Jewish Day of Atonement (see *Leviticus* 16). But the Jews were not disposed to unite with the Muslims. After the Battle of Badr (624 AD), in which the Muslim forces under Muhammad gained a victory over the Meccans, the Prophet no longer felt that he had need of the support of the Jews.

Keeping the Fast

The injunction to keep the Fast is found in *Qur'an* 2.183-87. From dawn until dusk, in either case at the moment when a white thread can be distinguished from a black thread, 'full-grown' and physically fit Muslims are obliged to abstain from eating, drinking, rinsing the mouth with water, smoking, and from sexual intercourse. Some Islamic authorities have even forbidden the swallowing of saliva, insisting that it is to be ejected from the mouth. For the fasting to be valid, it must begin with an individual Muslim's expression of *intention* (*niyah*) to perform the

fast faithfully, according to custom. There is no universal agreement among Muslims about whether this expression of intent is to be made daily or just at the beginning of the period of fasting. Those who fast must be fully aware of what they are doing before beginning the Fast. Women must be free from menstruation and from bleeding in childbirth.

In the Islamic world the keeping of the Fast has important consequences for the whole community. The rhythm of daily life is governed by the requirements of the Fast. The usual patterns of life are disrupted. Offices and shops close earlier, although more normal life begins at the end of each day's fasting. But it is a mistake to think of the month of fasting as one which can be described as a protracted hunger fast in the Islamic community. A Muslim may eat anything that is lawful up to 90 minutes before the Fast for the day begins. After sunset anything that it is lawful to eat or drink may be consumed. During the hours of darkness, after the sun has set, generous provision is often made for eating and drinking.

Dispensations from the Fast

The rigorous laws about fasting during *Ramadan* may be relaxed in some cases. Those who are excused from keeping the fast include: children, old people, the sick, pregnant and nursing women, those engaged in heavy manual labour, military personnel on active service, students (who are presumed to be 'striving in the way of God' as they seek to acquire knowledge), travellers who set out on their journeys before sunrise, and those of unsound mind. All who 'strive' in the service of God are *mujahidin*. The word sometimes appears in English as *Mujahideen*. It does not merely mean 'freedom fighters'. The rules of fasting are relaxed for those who are deemed to be likely to suffer damage to life if subjected to the rigours of the Fast, but when circumstances change a Muslim is expected to make up for the omission. Those who

cannot endure the pangs of hunger or thirst as a result of fasting may seek temporary respite, but there is a 'ransom' for those unable to fast at all. This may be 'paid' by feeding someone who is indigent.

It can be well understood that all these rules about the fast, and about the circumstances in which an individual or a group may be temporarily dispensed from its requirements, are subjected to local interpretation and application, according to one or other of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence. But the general position with regard to fasting during the sacred month is clear, set out as it is in *Qur'an* 2.183ff. God does not make the Fast too burdensome for anyone. Yet tradition has it that anyone who breaks the Fast deliberately must subsequently make a 60-day fast of repentance in its place, must purchase the freedom of a slave, or pay substantial alms. For one who dies whilst there is still an obligation on him to fast, a near relative must undertake to complete it.

Voluntary fasting

There are certain sins, for the cleansing of which additional fast-days are sometimes prescribed (*Qur'an* 5.98). For Muslims who are especially devout in their practice, or who desire to do penance for bad deeds, there is the opportunity to undertake additional periods of fasting. This practice is desirable rather than obligatory, and it counts as earning merit. An additional fast is recommended, for instance, on the day of 'Ashura' (see paragraph 6 above), or for six days during the month of *Shawwal*, the lunar month which follows the month of *Ramadan*. Fasting is forbidden during the main festivals of the *Breaking of the Fast* and of *Sacrifice*. In addition, times for prayer during the nights of the month, bring Muslims together in the mosques. Muslims hope that they will earn merit through the Fast, and that the faithful keeping of this obligation will cleanse them from their sins. Yet this pious hope remains a somewhat vague one, given that God is

perfectly free to act as He chooses with regard to His judgement and His forgiveness. When all is said and done, the Fast is one of the religious duties of a Muslim. To fulfil it is only to do one's duty. One fasts because God wills that one should.

These notes may suggest ways in which Christians can reflect about the significance and the importance of fasting in their own lives. For Muslims (as indeed, for Catholics) the thoughtless fulfilment of any religious duty renders the action worthless. What counts is the intention of the believer at the time the action is performed. In the case of fasting, for example, Catholics have something to learn from Muslims, not merely with regard to what is undertaken during the penitential season of Lent, but at other times of the year as well.

This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue, founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples. The Committee is grateful to its member Prof. Edward Hulmes for his contribution.

+Charles Henderson, Chairman.

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Questions for discussion

1. We now live 'in those days' (see paragraph 2 above) but how seriously is fasting taken by the followers of Christ - not to mention the prayerer, with which it is associated in the New Testament?
2. What may Christians learn from Muslims about the *how* and the *why* of fasting?

Notes

1. A useful English version of the Qur'an (Koran) is the one prepared by N.J. Dawood, and published by Penguin in the 1990 edition.
2. *Anno Hejirae*, 'in the year of the *hijrah*', that is, in the year of Muhammad's move from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina), which marks the beginning of the Islamic era.

Edward Hulmes March 2001