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Perspectives on Fasting in Islam

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Perspectives on Fasting in Islam

(prepared for unpublished collection on anthropology of fasting)

"There are two pleasures in fasting, one when the person who fasts breaks it, and the other in the next world when he meets his Lord. The very smell of the mouth of a keeper of a fast is more agreeable to God than the smell of musk"

(A saying of Muhammad, quoted in Hughes 1965: 124)

No present-day religious tradition makes fasting so central a part of its practice as Islam (Von Grunebaum 1951). All of the millions of believers in the prophesy of Muhammad (with certain exceptions I will discuss later) have an absolute obligation to fast during the entire holy lunar month of Ramadan ⁱ. Although the required fast during Ramadan is only the fourth pillar of the five which make up Islam's major commandments, it is the injunction often considered by Muslim laymen to be the most closely associated with the essence of the religion. For instance, my Pukhtun informants in Northern Pakistan kept the fast rigorously, though in other aspects of religious practice many of them were very notably lax. But for these men and women the fact that they fasted strictly meant that they were good Muslims, despite any other sins they might commit. Even the avowedly secular will often make an effort to fast on at least the 1st, the 15th and the final few days of Ramadan.

Lindholmfasting

Similar sorts of attitudes are reported throughout the Middle East; even in sophisticated cities such as Karachi or Cairo, intentional breaking of the fast is something few will admit to. As Edward Lane remarks "The modern Muslims seem to regard the fast of Ramadan as of more importance than any other religious act, for many of them keep the fast who neglect their daily prayers; and even those who break the fast, with very few exceptions, pretend to keep it" (1836: 93-4). The importance of the fast is signaled as well by the celebration of its completion in the major holiday of the entire Muslim calendar, Eid al-fatr.

At first glance, it is remarkable that fasting should have taken such a pride of position in Muslim practice, since it is mentioned very little in the Koran. There are in fact only four suras (verses) about Ramadan in the entire holy book ⁱⁱ. The history of the fast is itself obscure and controversial. It is likely that Muhammad was influenced by his knowledge of the then very severe Eastern Christian fasts and the numerous Jewish fasts of atonement and penance. But there also was a clear tradition of ancient Arabian fasting and of Manichean 30 day fasts which Muhammad probably drew upon in promulgating his new religion. However, the prophet did not simply appropriate a pre-existing concept of the fast and cobble it onto his annunciation. Instead, the practice of fasting was radically transformed, so that it gained a continued grip on the custom of Muslims today, while the fasts of competing traditions have generally lost their intensity and importance. In order to

understand this remarkable persistence, we first have to understand both the nature of the fast itself, and the religious context in which it occurs.

The Islamic Context

Orthodox Islam has been likened by Ernest Gellner to Protestantism as a religion of this-worldly asceticism, egalitarianism and individual salvation (Gellner 1981). While this comparison may overlook important distinctions, it is an apposite characterization in many respects. Sunni Islam - the dominant form - indeed does deny any sacred hierarchy among believers, and no Muslim can claim any legitimate spiritual superiority over any other ⁱⁱⁱ. Salvation is achieved solely by personal adherence to the right path laid down by an all-powerful God in the Koran as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and by emulating Muhammad's example as transmitted in hadith - the remembrances of his disciples. Allah accepts one's efforts, or not, as He wills. Nor can salvation be sought in an escape into mysticism. The Muslim must live and work in this world, but with eyes on the next.

Islam is also like Fundamentalist Protestantism in its resolute aversion to any efflorescence of symbolism; what is said is what is meant - no more, nor less. If Allah is portrayed with his hand reached toward the sinner, the helping hand is not a symbol of God's forgiveness; it is a real hand, with fingers and nails. Any absurdities this literalness may seem to entail are taken as indications of human incapacity to accept the infinite potentiality of an omnipotent God. Temptations toward symbolic

Lindholmfasting

interpretation are thus repudiated strongly by the faithful, and one must take Islam as it is, in its matter-of-fact austerity. However, if Sunni Islam is Protestant-like in some respects, it is most un-Protestant in its cohesion and continuity. As opposed to the fragmentation of Protestantism, there is in Islam massive acceptance of the basic precepts, and a remarkable sense of participation among Sunni Muslims in one vast unified faith that straddles enormous racial, ethnic and linguistic distinctions as well as wide divisions in interpretation. Part of the reason for this solidarity is the strong emphasis in Islam on shared practices - practices which are simple, direct and spiritually compelling. The accent on practice reveals the essence of Islam itself, since the word Islam derives from the Arabic aslama, meaning the act of surrender, becoming resigned and submissive, with the added implication of becoming safe, secure and free through submission ^{iv}. Islam thus requires of the faithful active conformity to the practices enjoined by God, and offers a promise of reward in return. Because of the emphasis on application, Islam has been appropriately described as a religion not so much of orthodoxy as of orthopraxy, in which devotion is both revealed by and a result of habitual enjoined actions. These actions, as might be expected, have a specific, concrete form and content that instructs the followers in the essential message of the Prophet: submit and accept, and you shall be redeemed. Showing a deep appreciation of human nature, the redemption offered is not only in the after-life, but also here and now, as a foretaste of what

Lindholmfasting

is to come. The rhythm of Islam then is one of resigned self-abnegation and willed submission, followed by both an immediate and a promised compensation - a kind of sacred behaviorism. For example, consider the necessity of prayer, which is one of the pillars of the faith. Muslims ought to pray five times a day, starting early in the morning and ending in the evening; prayer is a time-consuming and fairly arduous ritual, involving repeated prostrations and lengthy standardized recitations of faith. Aside from its spiritual value, prayer also brings people together in the community of believers, since all pray at the same time, in the same manner, facing in the same direction. This co-ordination engenders an empowering feeling of solidarity in the practitioners. As many Muslims have attested, the act of prayer also offers a sense of exhilaration and profound peace that I attribute in part to the trance-like state induced by the prescribed regulated breathing, chanting, and rhythmic movements of the supplicants. Even without their spiritual meaning, these activities could have a potent depersonalizing effect, as anyone who has studied dissociative states knows.

Another pillar of Islam is the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Here too great sacrifice is demanded of the faithful, especially when undertaking the trip meant a long and dangerous overland journey through the desert. But the reward is also very great, as the believers all participate in the vast and moving ritual of leveling and identification with the spiritual that is the climax of the journey - and return to their homelands with greatly enhanced status.

Lindholmfasting

A similar pattern is found as well in the injunction to give alms, another required exercise in selflessness for Muslim people. Almsgiving, however, also results in an immediate heightening of secular status, and an even greater hundred-fold return is promised on earth, as well as a reward in Heaven. Even jihad, the holy war, has a parallel structure, as the faithful sacrifice their lives for the true religion, but with the certainty of instant entrance into paradise as restitution. The cycle of sacrifice and reward, admittedly somewhat abstract in the previous examples, is clearest in the pattern of the fast, where personal abstinence is linked to public participation in a shared consolidating ritual, and where self-sacrifice is tied in the most immediate way possible to pleasure and fulfillment, in a manner which I will discuss below.

The Ramadan Fast

Before entering into the discussion of Ramadan, perhaps I should begin with a word on methodology. Most of this paper is based on literature and on my own ethnographic knowledge. But to check my understanding of the fast, I conducted informal interviews with a number of Muslims friends and acquaintances in the Boston area. Furthermore, my assistant, Ms. Archana Nagraj, did extensive formal interviews on attitudes toward fasting with 18 young Muslim students, ranging in age from 18 to 27, who are presently living in the Boston area ^v. Material from these interviews will be used in the pages to follow to illustrate attitudes to fasting that prevail among this admittedly small and Westernized sample; I should state, however, that I was very

Lindholmfasting

impressed with the degree to which the responses of our Americanized and educated interviewees mirrored orthodox Muslim practice and belief.

To turn then to fasting in Islam: Ramadan, literally 'the scorcher' (indicating either its original position in mid-summer, or the bodily heat generated by the fast), is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar ^{vi}. The month of Rajib was probably the original Arabic holy period, but it was displaced by Muhammad in honor of Ramadan, which takes precedence as the only month mentioned by name in the Koran, and is renowned as the month when the Koran was revealed to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel. It is also likely, as Wagtendonk hypothesizes (1968), that the replacement of Rajib by Ramadan was a commemoration by Muhammad of the decisive battle of Badr, which took place during Ramadan, where the defeat of the Meccan armies marked the beginning of Islamic ascendancy ^{vii}.

The fast begins and ends when the new moon is sighted by reliable witnesses and validated by accepted religious figures ^{viii}. Sirens, cannons and radio announcements herald the close of each day, and the close of entire month. The fast itself is called saum, from the root "to be still," which signifies that the fast is a complete cessation, not merely a matter of abstention or austerity. The fast in Islam is total and is much stricter than fasts in other religious traditions. It is forbidden to eat, drink, smoke, chew tobacco, or to put anything into the body. According to some of the more zealous, even spittle should not be swallowed, nor should fragrance be inhaled

Lindholmfasting

^{ix}. Furthermore, sexual contact is strictly forbidden. Nor can there be forced vomiting, nor retention in the body of anything that would normally be rejected. The fast is, in other words, not simply a restriction on eating, but a general limitation on the borders of the body, and is associated with maintaining an inviolate purity ^x. This aspect is clear in the restriction on menstruating women, who are not permitted to fast during their periods, though they are obliged to make the time up later ^{xi}. Aside from menstruating women, others are either debarred from fasting, or allowed to put off the fast for a time. Children below maturity do not have to fast, though they often begin trying to abstain from a very early age, encouraged by their parent's pride and their own desire to be good Muslims. The infirm need not fast, but they must in compensation feed the poor, or make up the time when they are well. Nor are the insane expected to follow the rules that bind believers. Travellers also may put off the fast until their journey is over, when they must make up the days missed. Penalties for breaking the fast vary. Unintentional breaking of the fast is "understood" by God, and may be forgiven or paid for by an extra day. According to some Muslim clerics, intentional breaking can lead to very severe penalties: sexual contact, for instance, is punishable by sixty days of fasting or feeding sixty needy persons. However, the Muslim students interviewed for this paper did not have any clear idea of what is required to redeem an intentional breaking of the fast (guesses ranged from fasting four days to fasting for one hundred days). This

Lindholmfasting

seemed to be because fasting is understood as a personal contract between the individual and God, and the stress was always on this relationship and on the personal intent of the faster, not on any prescribed penalties, which, in any case, must be self-imposed.

Islam also is generally not inclined to impose rigorous punishments on believers, who, after all, are fallible and weak. It favors instead 'permissions' that allow an evasion or easement of the literal conditions of the law. As one famous jurist wrote: "Knowledge means that you are able to grant a permission and base it on the authority of a reliable traditionalist. Anyone can find a restriction easily enough" (quoted in Goldhizer 1981: 56). Furthermore, Allah is a forgiving and compassionate God, who understands and pardons human frailty. It is perhaps in this context that those who occasionally break the fast do not feel too guilty about their sin.

During the month of the fast, people are expected to do their daily work, though of course those who can afford it sometimes do not. But in Muslim countries the world does not come to a standstill during Ramadan, though the pace slows very obviously and tempers often may become short. So, for example, Richard Burton writes that during Ramadan "the mosques are crowded with a sulky, grumbling population, making themselves offensive to one another on earth whilst working their way toward heaven" (Burton 19//:////).

Lindholmfasting

However, this jaundiced outsider's view is not supported by the testimony of the people themselves. Islamic religious commentators portray Ramadan as a time of blessing and religious exaltation, an attitude echoed by those whom we interviewed, who agreed that Ramadan was a month of peace and unity, where, as one put it, people are "internally happy" and there is a "peak" of spiritual performance. The Koran too speaks of the fast as a good thing, not something which ought to be painful or difficult. It is precisely the ease of the fast that is cited as the reason people can continue to work during it.

If the fast is easy, it is at least partially because the interdicts of the fast are balanced by its remissions, since fasts in Islam, unlike those of other religions, last only from sunrise to sunset. Ramadan, in fact, is strictly divided into night and day. While fasting during the day is total, all restrictions are lifted as soon as the sun sets and until "a white thread can be discriminated from a black thread at daybreak". During this period, the Koran enjoins the believers to "approach your wives... and eat and drink" (Koran surah///). In point of fact, one does not tend to lose weight during the fast. Rather, the contrary is very often the case. It is estimated that in Cairo, for example, grocery bills are from three to five times higher during Ramadan than at any other time during the year. Not only is more quantity of food usually eaten during the evenings of Ramadan, but the meals are also of higher quality, consisting of feast foods and sweets consumed only on special occasions ^{xii}. The plenty of the evening is

Lindholmfasting

accompanied as well with a gathering of friends and family in a joyous celebration of the solidarity of the community. In a similar vein, alms and food are publicly redistributed to the poor by businesses and by those who have any surplus, so that everyone can observe not only the fast, but also the feast that follows it.

During this sacred month, cities and villages take on a carefree air as the streets are lit up throughout the night; shadow plays and other forms of theater and musical entertainment also enliven the evening for the people who gather in large numbers in the main squares, where they socialize and share in the general celebration. The mosques are also lit up and open all night, and men who wish to do so gather for extra prayers, the tarawih, where, as one of my informants said, they are "side to side, foot to foot," united in worship.

The solitary rigors of the fast during the day are thus balanced by the communal feasting and gathering of the faithful in the evening celebrations. This rhythm of constraint and release, solitude and community, culminates in the great festival of Eid al-fatr (literally the lesser festival, but in actuality the major celebration of the year ^{xiii}). This celebration in which, as one observer writes, "all is life and joy, cheerful bustle and amusement" (Ali 19//://), is very much an affirmation of participation and renewal, as Muslims everywhere put on new clothes, visit, embrace, offer one another special food and drink, and congratulate one another for having successfully completed the fast. It is above all a day for the giving of

Lindholmfasting

alms to the poor, and for a gathering of all people for prayer in a public space, preferably in an open field and not in the mosque, so that any sectarian divisions are ignored for the moment. The music and celebrations that marked the whole month are intensified, and there may be as well a visiting of the tombs of the ancestors, reaffirming again the continuity of the community (see Lane vol II 1836: 238 for a full description of this holiday as kept in Cairo in the mid-nineteenth century; Jomier and Corbin 1956 for a later view of the same festival, Goitein 1966 for a general statement on fasting).

Eid al Fatr thus is a celebration of the community at large, extending beyond the family and the mosque to all Muslims. Wealth is redistributed, the ancestors are venerated, and participation is accentuated. Individual sacrifice during the fast is thus compensated for by massive community rewards that reinforce the value of submission. The Eid festival replicates the pattern of the entire cycle of the fast, offering immediate benefit for the act of personal asceticism.

Fasting then is hardly regarded by Muslims as a means for reaching a transcendent state, nor is it in any sense a way of atoning for sins through suffering, as is the ideology of the Judeo-Christian tradition of fasting. Rather, as the Koran says "good shall it be for you to fast, if you but knew it" (surah //). In fact, the fast is sometimes explained by laymen simply as healthy (one informant called it "giving the stomach a rest") that is ordained by God for the well-being of man.

The Moral Virtue of Fasting

Lindholmfasting

However, the fast does have a deeper ethical content that most Muslims recognize. The "happiness" commented on by my informant is not a happiness that he conceptualized to be merely the result of the pleasures of the evening celebrations, nor of the purification of the body by the austerity of the day. Instead, it is a state of mind engendered by other demands of the fast which are moral in nature.

A hadith states that "there are many keepers of the fast who gain nothing by fasting but hunger and thirst". This is because, as among Protestant Christians, simple observance of outer form is not considered adequate for believers. The fast has also to be undertaken with the proper intent and in the proper frame of mind. So that, as another hadith tells us, "if a keeper of the fast does not abandon lying, God does not care about his ceasing to eat and drink." Not only lying, but all slander, lust, obscenity, and anger should be suppressed during Ramadan in favor of kindness, charity, and calm. It is, as one young man said, a time of "being nice to everyone, attempting to keep everything impure out of the mind, attempting to stop yourself from doing things natural to most humans, and succeeding."

The purity of the body thus ought to be matched by purity of the soul, and believers must practice detachment and self-regulation to subdue the unruly natural passions if their fast is to be a valid one. The experience of overcoming the bodily pangs of hunger and thirst is therefore paralleled by the higher struggle to overcome impulse and desire through spiritual discipline.

Lindholmfasting

Thus the Muslim teacher Shah Waliullah writes that the deeper aim of the fast is to "induce an adequate appreciation of the torments of hunger and strike at the root of the carnal appetite (quoted in Nidwi 1972: 180); in this he follows Muhammad al-Ghazzali, the great Muslim synthesizer of scholarship and mysticism, who argued that the whole purpose of the fast is to subdue the passions, which are stimulated by eating and drinking. Fasting is therefore one step toward self-purification and drawing closer to God.

The fast then is a conscious effort by the individual to rise above the body to achieve a higher spiritual character and thereby to become more worthy of salvation. It is, in essence, a kind of contract between the individual and God; each day of the fast begins with the niya, a statement of intention, in which the believer promises to fast in good faith. God may accept the fast which the believer offers, or He may not. The proper state of mind for the believer then is a hovering between fear and hope - a mental condition familiar to our Puritan forbearers. It is also the uncertain state cultivated by religious instruction in Islamic schools, where self-abnegation and control over desire is a prerequisite for achieving spiritual redemption (see Lapidus 1984).

However, the restraint demanded is, as we have seen, only temporary; nor are these restraints meant to be arduous.

Rather, the emphasis is on gradual immersion into a sacred and detached state through a process of withdrawal from the world. According to tradition, the first ten days of the fast gain

Lindholmfasting

God's mercy, the second merit his pardon, but the final ten days are the most important, bringing salvation from Hell. As I mentioned, even the most secular Muslims very often fast for the last few days of Ramadan, and the devotees use these last days to isolate themselves in the mosque, where they lose themselves in continuous prayer.

These last ten days, called I'tikaf, have been associated with the ten days of penance and the day of atonement in Judaism, but the tenor is different indeed. Far from a period of atonement, the Muslim practice stresses affirmation and unity with God, and especially emphasizes the rewards God gives in return for the submission offered by the devout. This latter aspect is expressed powerfully in the imagery of the lailat al kadr, the 'night of power' or 'night of measuring out'. This is the night that, according to tradition, makes Ramadan a holy month, since it is on this night that the angel Gabriel revealed the Koran to Muhammad.

It is written in the Koran that this night is worth 1,000 months in its holiness. According to popular tradition, on the night of power the sky is split open by an angel on a horse, animals and plants will bow down to God, the water of the ocean becomes sweet, and the world is at perfect peace. This is a moment when all sins are forgiven if the worshipper wins God's favor through piety and submission, as expressed in fasting and prayer. In other words, it is period when 'extra credit' is given by Allah to the devout xiv.

Lindholmfasting

It is notable that the exact date of the lailat al kadr is not known; it is one of the odd-numbered nights of the last ten nights of Ramadan - probably the 27th. But the uncertainty acts to spread the fervor and piety of the worshippers throughout this period, and to focus their attention on the blessings and forgiveness offered by Allah in return for their acceptance of His commands. The emphasis is on trust in God's mercy.

Ramadan then is not portrayed in the Koran or in the commentaries as a hardship. Instead, the surah on fasting says the "God wishes you ease and not discomfort, he wishes you to complete the desired period of days, and to glorify God for his guidance, and to be thankful" (surah ///). Islam is portrayed as a faith that is easy and moderate in comparison to Christianity and Judaism; the fast is not a penance, but a mechanism for stimulating a concentrated unity among believers which can help strengthen their personal resolve to act with proper moral dispassion, expiate their sins, and gain the mercy of a compassionate God without undue strain. "The accord and convergence of Muslims on a particular thing, at a particular time, with all the people seeing one thing, lends encouragement to them and makes fasting easy... This concord and unity of purpose is the cause of the descent of spiritual blessings on both the high and the low" (Shah Waliullah, quoted in Nadwi 1972: 195-6).

Beneath the hope for blessing is a faith in God's reciprocity; a faith rewarded already in the mundane world by the enjoyment of the nightly feast. The faithful, having experience such an

Lindholmfasting

immediate return for their efforts, find it easy to believe as well that any suffering undergone in fasting will be recompensed a thousandfold in heaven, where a special gateway is opened for those who fast - a gateway available to all men and women, since all can undertake and complete the Ramadan fast without imposing too great a burden upon themselves.

Fasting and Politics

Islam is a religion which opposes all forms of hierarchy. The fast is not for experts (Kafka's 'hunger artists'), but for everyone, which is why God has made it easy and has offered immediate earthly rewards, as well as enormous heavenly benefits, for those who submit to it. It follows that fasting cannot be excessive. It is, in fact, forbidden to continue the fast beyond the month of Ramadan, though other days in which fast may be undertaken are noted in the Koran ^{xv}. Even the mystically inclined al-Ghazzali, who favored fasting as a spiritual discipline, opposed any extended fast. Rather, he recommended life-long fasting on alternative days; a method which the Prophet also advocated, but did not practice. And it must be remembered that even this most strenuous of Muslim fasts must be broken every evening by eating and drinking enough to sustain life and health.

Muslims, like Puritans, are instructed by their religion to live in the world, which God has created for us. Attempting to deny one's body and its earthly needs is a sin of pride. The temptation to asceticism that is so compelling for certain zealous temperaments is to be opposed. Instead, a balance should

Lindholmfasting

be struck between the passion for worldly pleasure and the equally ruinous passion for renunciation, which causes "physical as well as intellectual weakness, disrupts family ties, and throws society into confusion and disorder" (Shah Waliullah, quoted in Nadwi 1972: 169). Muslims therefore have the duty to fast, but always within limits, since fasting is not a way of escaping from the world, but rather a way of living in a more moderate and virtuous manner in the world.

In consequence, fasting as a political act - a method of coercing authority - is rarely heard of in Muslim society. There are, of course, exceptions. The Turkish Janissary warriors are reported to have refused food from lords of whom they disapproved (this incident is cited in Lewis 1988). But such refusals are more in the nature of a denial of commensality and thus of feudal loyalty. Some left-wing secular groups in Muslim countries are also reputed to have held hunger strikes in prison and in universities, though I have not found any confirmation of this. But obviously the hunger strike has never made much headway in the Islamicate.

However, there is another form of modern protest that is indicative of the contemporary problematic of political fasting in a societies where secularization and Islamic mores are increasingly in conflict: this is the protest registered by eating publicly during Ramadan as a graphic repudiation of religious influence in the state. Informants from Turkey - the most secularized state in the Middle East - say this type of protest has indeed occurred in the last few years, led by groups

Lindholmfasting

opposing the enlarged importance of religion in government, and that these 'counter-fasts' have resulted in riots. A similar reaction was occasioned by the efforts of Tunisia's modernizing President Bourguiba to relax the rules restricting public eating during Ramadan. The resultant furor obliged him to back down quickly.

Much more common in the Muslim past has been cessation of fasting not to protest against religion, but rather to symbolize one's supposed spiritual superiority. The fast is so central to Muslim identity and to religious discipline that there has been no more powerful - or more dangerous - way to make a claim for supernatural preeminence than the repudiation of fasting. For instance, Sufi mystics, who seek inner understanding (batin) rather than the strict adherence to the outer forms of Islam (zahir), sometimes stop fasting as a sign of their enlightenment. Having reached a level of communion with Allah, they believe they no longer need follow the rules which are made for lesser mortals. However, in so doing, they invite opprobrium and possible persecution from more literal Muslims. Similarly, some Muslim sects, especially extremist Shi`ites who follow prophetic figures claiming to be the redeemer, the mahdi, have sometimes limited the fast or stopped it altogether to express their new purity and separation from the Muslim community. The best example are the Nizari Ismailis (the so-called 'assassins'). In 1164, their imam proclaimed that the end of time had come; it was no longer necessary to keep the rules of the religion. The new heavenly status of the Nizari faithful

Lindholmfasting

was graphically symbolized by publicly turning the Ramadan fast into a feast - a scandalous act completely dividing them from other Muslims. The public feast during Ramadan lasted for fifty years, when a new prophecy explained that the end of time was only provisional; the faithful now had to return to keeping the fast, as well as the other rules of Islam (see Hodgeson 1955 for an account).

For the students interviewed for this paper such excesses were certainly far beyond their experience. Nor did they believe in any possibility for political fasting within the Islamic context. Most were quite certain that fasting to the death, as occurred in Tiannenman Square, would not be allowed by Islam, since it would break the fundamental Muslim rule against excess and self-destruction. Furthermore, some noted that a political fast would lose its meaning, since a fast should be directed inward, toward the learning of discipline and submission for the sake of the compassionate deity, whereas a political fast would merely be an attempt to be coercive.

Some students did think that a politically oriented fast might be possible, but only if completely divorced from religion. How this might occur was not clear. One said that a fast during times of famine, which would permit others to eat, would be a valid type of fast. Another said a fast against oppression would be legitimate if it were privately offered up to God as a sacrifice, and not made publicly to influence politicians. Fasting, for this young man, was a personalized pact with God taking the form of submission and a request for God's help. It

Lindholmfasting

was a fast of this latter type that a number of Kuwaitis undertook during the Iraqi occupation - a fast from sunrise to sunset on Thursdays with the purpose of asking God to intercede on their behalf. However, for none of the students was a full-time, life-threatening fast aimed at coercing a desired response from a secular authority a real prospect.

Is this simply a result of not having a tradition of political fasting, as in China? I do not think so. As I have tried to show, fasting is too deeply integrated into the lives of Muslims as a religious and moral pact with God, and too expressive of the Muslim religious cycle of personal constraint and communal reward, for it to be utilized for other purposes. As long as the community is one of belief, fasting will retain its particularly religious character.

Conclusion

To reiterate, fasting in Islam during Ramadan and at other times is not imagined as atonement for sins, nor as suffering. Rather, as befits the Islamic ethos, the fast is pragmatic, egalitarian, and oriented toward the unity of the community as well as the salvation of the individual. The personal restraint and virtue of the faithful during the day is rewarded both by a communal celebration at night, and by redemption in the afterlife. High and low are leveled through the giving of alms, while sharing in hunger gives the wealthy a sense of the contingency of their plenty and their brotherhood with the impoverished, who, like all other Muslims, share in both the fast and the feast. Muslim identity and the fast are thus deeply

intertwined, and can only be disentangled at the price of apostasy.

6530 words total

Endnotes:

i The spelling of Arabic words in this paper makes no attempt at any exact orthography.

ii The Koran does approve voluntary private acts of abstinence as a mark of humility and piety, as a compensation for wrongdoing, and as a possible cure for certain illnesses. These verses are probably remnants of the traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia, where persons would promise to abstain for a time from eating, cutting hair, bathing, sexual intercourse, and bloodshed to gain the favor of a local deity or to atone for breaking a law (see Wensinck 19//, Wagtendonk 1968).

iii Shi'ites, on the other hand, believe in a spiritual hierarchy centered in the descendants of `Ali, the prophet's son-in-law. Some Sufis also make claims to a mystical union with God that place them above other believers. However, in this paper, I will concern myself primarily with Sunni Islam.

iv Muslim is the active present participle of aslama

v All but one of those interviewed were Sunni, and the majority were originally from Pakistan, though some were from North Africa and Egypt; one was born in America, but all had spent some time in the United States and spoke fluent English. A few considered themselves to be zealous Muslims, but most were not as religious as they wished to be. Three were female. The interviews followed a schedule and each took an hour or more to complete.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Nagraj for her excellent work in collecting these interviews, and also to express my gratitude to the young men and women who generously gave their time to share their knowledge of Islam with us.

vi The lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the solar calendar, meaning that there is a rotation of Muslim holidays every 32 years. Part of the genius of Muhammad was to create a new way of measuring time which would effectively remove all Muslim holidays from any previous connection to seasonal celebrations. This is part of the general Islamic opposition to 'ritualism' in favor of practice sanctioned solely by the Koran (see Graham 19// for a valuable discussion of this aspect of the Islamic annunciation).

vii This association remains strong. The 'Yom Kippur' war with Israel was known in the Muslim world as the war of Ramadan, and the code name given by Anwar Sadat for the first battle was 'Badr'.

viii The beginning and ending of Ramadan thus can be an object of considerable contention, as some religious experts may claim to have seen the moon, while others deny it. Government regulation does not

solve the problem, as witness a recent altercation in Cairo, when one mosque declared the end of Ramadan a day before the official close, leading to the arrest of the mosque's spiritual leaders (I want to thank Frank Mullaney for this information). Differences between rival sects also may be imagined as differences in the timing of the fast. One young man interviewed for this paper believed that Shi'ites begin and end their fast five minutes before orthodox Sunnis.

ix According to my informants, in American mosques, where people from a variety of backgrounds and different ideals of austerity about fasting gather together, the question of appropriate practice can be vexatious. Religious leaders generally counsel each believer to follow his or her own understanding of the demands of the Koran, and not to interfere with the practices of others.

x It is perhaps worth noting that in Islam animals about to be sacrificed are purified by not being allowed to eat.

xi Despite the fact that women, as cooks, have to put up with more temptation to break the fast during the day than men, they do not appear to feel that the fast is onerous. Rather, women resent the limits to fasting put on them by menstruation. In Swat, where I did my fieldwork, the only time women took birth control pills was during Ramadan, because they realized the pills stopped the onset of menses. In general, women are more strict in observing the fast than men are.

xii The more austere do not indulge themselves, and it is considered correct to eat no more during Ramadan than one would eat ordinarily. But it is noteworthy that everyone is obliged to break the fast and to eat at least as much as is eaten when one is not fasting.

xiii Eid al Attar, the greater festival, is also a commemoration and re-enactment of sacrifice which involves a great communal feast - usually of a sheep which has been cleansed by fasting, slaughtered and shared out with family, dependents and the poor. See Coombs-Shilling 198/ for a discussion of this festival and its symbolic meaning.

xiv One rationale for this is derived from the tradition that people in the past lived much longer than they do today and were able to accumulate more merit through their fasts. To compensate, the night of power allows short-lived modern man to gain equal merit in only one night.

xv None of these fasts are obligatory, as the Ramadan fast is, though they are considered spiritually and physically beneficial. But they are not close to Ramadan in their importance and efficacy. They include: Ashura, a voluntary fast day on the tenth of the Shi'ite holy month of Muharram, honored by Sunni Muslims as well as the day of creation; the six days immediately after the great festival of Eid al fatr; the days of the 'white nights' (the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th of each month) and the days of the 'black nights' (the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th). In any case, to fast for more than four days in succession (save during Ramadan and after Eid) is deemed wrong by the commentators (see Gibb and Kiamer 1965: 504-7).