

# The Ramadan Fast

By Prof. Dr. Christine Schirrmacher

*Fasting (in Arabic: saum) plays an important role in Islam. The tradition, made up of accounts of decisions of Muhammad and his followers in the early Islamic community, expands and expounds the preliminary stipulations laid down in the Koran. Predominant is Ramadan, the annual month-long fast in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, which is binding on all Muslims of both sexes from puberty onwards. Deliberate failure to observe it is regarded as a heinous offence.*

## The Origin of the Fast

The duty of fasting is referred to in the Koran, but developments probably took place in primitive Islam which led to the current practise. A day-long fast for early Muslims may have been adapted from the Yom Kippur fast of Jewish tribes in Medina. <sup>1</sup>

After Muhammed received a revelation to pray toward Mecca instead of Jerusalem, rejected his previous assimilation to Jewish religious customs and became increasingly alienated from both Judaism and Christianity, the fast took on a more and more specific Islamic character.

An alternative view is that fasting may have been part of ritual preparations for the celebration of the “holy months” in pre-islamic Arabia. <sup>2</sup> It is unclear whether the first Muslims observed an obligatory fast before their departure (“hijra”) from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD or only after this. Only after Muhammed had received the revelation contained in Surah 2:185 was the month-long Ramadan fast declared to be binding:

“The month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Koran, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the Criterion (of right and wrong). Whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, (let him fast the same) number of other days ...”

## Night of Power – laylat al-qadr

The month-long Ramadan fast is thus a reminder of the “Night of Destiny” or “Night of Power” (in Arabic: *laylat al-qadr*) (surah 97:1) within that month on which the Koran came down from heaven. In another verse of the Koran it is referred to as the “Blessed Night” (in Arabic: *layla mubarak*) (44,3). It is unclear whether the entire Koran is thought of as being given or only the first in a series of revelations. The latter seems more likely, since over the years Muhammad received numerous revelations for particular circumstances.

Neither the Koran nor other early sources of Islam enable the exact “Night of Power” within the month of Ramadan to be determined, but many Muslims consider the odd dates to be more

likely, with a preference for those of the final ten days of Ramadan. On the basis of a tradition going back to Muhammad's favourite wife Aisha that Muhammad held a strict prayer vigil for the final ten days (Abu Dawud I,360), some Muslims spend these days in the mosque, while others stay home from work and the schools are closed. The whole pace of life slows down during the Fast, some shops close for the whole month, many do not open in day-time or only just before sunset for people to purchase provisions. Social life, particularly visits, takes place in the evening and at night, when family, relatives and friends are served especially tasty food. The family gathers for a last meal (suhur) shortly before sunrise, after which many try to sleep as long as possible into the new day in order to get through as much of the fast day as they can in bed.

According to tradition (Ibn Majah IV,351), to pray and fast in Mecca is worth as much forgiveness from God as a hundred thousand Ramadans elsewhere. Other traditions affirm a Muslim who piously prays and seeks God's will during the nights of Ramadan can be sure of divine forgiveness (Abu Dawud I,359). The month of Ramadan and especially the "night of power" is a time of meditation on God, hope of forgiveness and spiritual blessings or expecting a sign from God, but equally a time of hope of overcoming evil and of reconciliation between people alintated by disputes.

Certain traditions affirm God is "nearer" in the second half of the night during Ramadan than the first (Ibn Majah II,311), while according to Abu Huraira God descends (from heaven?) during the final third of the night and until dawn offers forgiveness to those who seek it, which is why the Prophet's companions used to say their prayers during that time (Ibn Majah II,312). On the first day of Ramadan, according to yet another tradition, the devil and demons are imprisoned, the gates of hell shut and those of paradise opened (Ibn Majah III,2). A further tradition states

"the first part of month is mercy, the middle part forgiveness and the close protection and deliverance from hell-fire." <sup>3</sup>

Some traditions identify the 21st night of Ramadan as the "night of power" (Abu Dawud I,362), others the 17th or 27th, yet others regard all nights as "nights of power" (Abu Dawud I,363). The 27th night is generally considered as the most likely for the revelation of the Koran and Muslims regard this night as full of "salvation and blessing" (surah 97:5). Surah 97:3 affirms "*the night of power is better than a thousand months*", because in it the gates of heaven opened and the angels descended (surah 97).

## Contenance and abstinence from food

The 30-day Ramadan fast is a moveable feast which begins 11 days earlier each year according to the Gregorian calendar, whose year is that much longer than the Islamic lunar calendar. While it is possible to compute statistically when Ramadan is due to begin in any given year, lunar observation is ultimately decisive. Only when the new moon has officially been sighted by the competent religious authorities is the start of Ramadan announced. A mere brief sighting is in many cases difficult. If the sky is clouded, the start of Ramadan may be postponed by a day, whereas in another Muslim country it may have been sighted and Ramadan will have begun. If it is impossible to observe the new moon, visual sightings are replaced by astronomical calculations and the start of the Fast is announced, a practise deriving from a traditional saying

of Muhammad:

“Do not fast until you see the new moon and do not break your fast until you see it, but if the moon is hidden, calculate the time span.” [4](#)

The role of the appearance of the crescent moon in calculating and determining religious duties explains its great significance in the Muslim world.

The Ramadan fast lasts from dawn to dusk on each of the 30 days, more precisely as long as there is sufficient light *“to distinguish a white thread from a black”* (surah 2:187), during which time eating, drinking (which in the view of many Muslims includes swallowing one’s own saliva), smoking, perfume, injections, unnecessary medical treatment and sexual intercourse are forbidden. According to the Koran sexual continence was originally required both night and day for thirty days but Muslims were incapable of keeping the command. They “deceived themselves” and God made a concession (2:187) requiring abstinence from dawn to dusk only. Ramadan is about more than abstinence from food, however. Many Muslims recite the entire Koran divided into the thirty sections of the Arabic original. Prayers are recited and there is greater attendance at the mosques, now specially decorated with lamps and carpets. Many visit the mosque again after sunset. A past rector of Cairo’s famous al-Azhar-University described the spiritual aspect of Ramadan as follows:

“Among other things the Ramadan fast is a spiritual journey on which Muslims learn patience, train themselves in the observance of fundamental Islamic principles of morality and humanity and in the course of which they strengthen their faith in God.”

[5](#)

Muslims are supposed also to abstain from inappropriate speech such as gossip, as well as from all immoral behaviour, and instead show kindness, generosity to the poor and readiness for reconciliation.

## Exceptions to the Fast

Pregnant or ritually unclean women (menstruation or childbed), travellers, the ill (2:184) and children are exempt from the obligation to fast, but adults have to make up for missed fast days later. The elderly are permitted to give more alms in lieu or may ask relatives to perform the fast in their stead.

The difficulty of fasting alone later instead of with the whole community leads many such as manual labourers, pregnant women or nursing mothers to jeopardize their or their child’s health by not breaking the fast. Conflicts may arise, especially in the West, for Muslims in hospital who insist on observing Ramadan.

Muslim theologians insist missing fast days should be made up for as soon as possible after Ramadan. Failure to do so promptly incurs a fine under the Islamic Sharia code usually consisting of added alms for the poor. Infringements such as sexual activity in day time also incur penalties, for instance redemption of a slave, a supplementary sixty-day fast or extensive almsgiving. [6](#) The infringed fast day does not count and also has to be made up, but fasting is

expressly forbidden on the “Feast of Breaking the Fast” immediately following Ramadan.

## Stipulations

Apart from the above exceptions, all adult Muslims who are not in a state of ritual impurity and who are in full possession of their faculties are obliged to fully complete the annual fast. It is not sufficient for a pious Muslim simply to abstain from food and drink during the required period. As in the prayer ritual five times daily the whole catalogue of prescriptions for the Fast must be observed. A single exception renders the fast invalid and as unfulfilled in God’s sight. The Koran itself does not stipulate in detail how the fast is to be held, but in the first centuries after it was written, the nascent Muslim jurisprudence fleshed out the bare bones of Koranic prescriptions with explanatory exegesis of the traditional texts. To be valid the fast must be begun with a “declaration of intent” (in Arabic: *niyya*), a vow to keep the full fast.

It is remarkable how many people observe the very strict regime of the monthly fast year by year. Fasting represents meditation on God, abstinence, but also a work of merit a person performs for God and which counts on the Day of Judgment to outweigh their evil deeds. In the West, where in summer daylight hours last considerably longer than in the Middle East, Muslims who only used to fast for a few days in their countries of origin are often scrupulous in their observance in order to keep up socio-religious appearances. An additional problem in non-Muslim countries is that daily life and work rhythms make no allowance for the need to fast.

## The Feast of Breaking the Fast

The renewed sighting of the crescent new moon signals the end of Ramadan and the beginning of Shawwal, the tenth month of the Muslim calendar. The fast is traditionally ended by consuming an odd number of dates with a little water. <sup>7</sup> The first of Shawwal is the start of the “Feast of Breaking the Fast” (in Arabic: *ʿīd al-fitr*) <sup>8</sup>, the second most important Muslim festival after the “Feast of Sacrifice” at the end of the month of pilgrimage. It is not a religious duty to celebrate this feast, but it counts as meretricious in God’s sight, and is related in popular thought to salvation, for on this day God forgives believers and grants them his blessing. <sup>9</sup> No one is allowed to fast at the “Feast of Breaking the Fast”, but afterwards voluntary fasting is permitted and regarded as particularly meretricious. Alms are distributed to the poor at the feast and its climax is prayer shortly after sunrise in the mosque.

The two great festivals, the “Feast of Breaking the Fast” and the “Feast of Sacrifice” are probably based on pre-islamic precedent. There is no reference to the “Feast of Breaking the Fast” in the Koran, but tradition relates that Muhammad himself instituted this feast in Medina in 623 or 624 AD. <sup>10</sup> This makes it part of the Sunna, binding customs originating with Muhammad, and thus close to a religious duty. It celebrates the successful completion of the thirty-day fast as well as joy at the descent of the Koran.

On the occasion of the feast many Muslims visit their relatives’ graves and bring presents for the cemetery caretakers and the poor, who in many cities live near the graveyard. In Cairo, reports Laila Nabhan, people pour water on the graves to relieve the torments of the dead, recite verses

from the Koran and pray for the departed. <sup>11</sup> God's absolute sovereignty over every human life means that the decision to condemn or reward with entry into paradise will only be taken at the Last Judgment and there is a real possibility of Muslims being sent to hell, although many theologians regard this only as a temporary purgatory. The visit to the grave expresses the hope that the supplicant's sins will be forgiven. <sup>12</sup> Visits to relatives, gifts to the poor, new clothes, presents for the children and special dishes are as much a traditional part of the Feast as special radio and television programmes.

## Fasting for penance

Additional penitential fasting outside of Ramadan is practised above all as a penance for sins of omission of religious duty, but may also be ordained as a punishment for particular offences. In the case of a broken oath surah 5:89 stipulates feeding ten poor, buying a slave his liberty or, if one is able, a three-day fast. Surah 5:95 and 2:196 provide for fasting as an atonement for killing game while in a consecrated state on the pilgrimage if the offender is unable to offer an animal sacrifice or feed the poor.

Surah 4:92 discusses the case of unpremeditated manslaughter, whether the victim be an enemy or an ally. This offence can be atoned for in God's sight by ransoming a slave, payment of wergeld or a two-month fast. This is in addition to the "secular punishment" in the form of restitution or blood money.

Over the years the stipulations about restitution have developed into a system of possibilities of obtaining atonement for religious offences and sins of omission. Penitentiary fasting is also a work one must perform for God, since acts such as fasting are seen as both obligatory and salvific. The annual thirty-day fast is no easy burden. Its observance is important because as a work of merit it is at least partially decisive for the outcome of judgment, whether salvation or perdition, although ultimately assurance of salvation is foreign to Islam.

- 
1. Albrecht Noth. I. Früher Islam. in: Ulrich Haarmann (Hg.). Geschichte der arabischen Welt. C. H. Beck: Munich, 1987. p. 48, since this is the opinion of several traditions; see also W. Montgomery Watt; Alford T. Welch. Der Islam I. Mohammed und die Frühzeit, Islamisches Recht, Religiöses Leben. Die Religionen der Menschheit. Bd. 25,1. W. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 1980, pp. 311-312 and Kees Wagtendonk. Fasting. In: Encyclopaedia of the Quran, II., E. J. Brill: Leiden, 2002, pp. 180-185, see p. 182. [↩](#)
  2. Stated by S. D. Goitein. Studies in Islamic History and Institutions. E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1966, pp. 92-93. [↩](#)
  3. Abdul Aziz Kamal. Islamisches Recht für den Alltag. In: al-Islam 6/2000, p. 4. [↩](#)
  4. J. Schacht. Hilal, 1. In Religious Law. In: Encyclopaedia of Islam III. E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1986, pp. 379-381, see p. 379. [↩](#)
  5. Leila Nabhan. Das Fest des Fastenbrechens ('id al-fitr) in Ägypten. Klaus Schwarz: Berlin, 1991, p. 39 giving as his source: Mahmud Shaltut. al-Islam wa -l-wujud al-dauli li l-muslimin, al-Qahira 1958. p. 62. [↩](#)
  6. Watt, Welch. Islam. p. 317. [↩](#)

7. Annemarie Schimmel. Die Zeichen Gottes. C. H. Beck: Munich, 1995, p. 102. [↩](#)
8. Laila Nabhan. Das Fest des Fastenbrechens (*'id al-fitr*) in Ägypten. Klaus Schwarz: Berlin, 1991. [↩](#)
9. Nabhan. Fest. p. 48. [↩](#)
10. Nabhan. Fest. p. 35. [↩](#)
11. Nabhan. Fest. p. 187+62. [↩](#)
12. Nabhan. Fest. S. 128. [↩](#)