MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FASTING IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE
A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

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Though the ritual of fasting is common to most of the known religious traditions, its practice and symbolic value may vary considerably. This paper aims at a comparative study into meaning and significance of this ritual with special reference to the three Semitic religions namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some interesting similarities and dissimilarities in this connection are noted. It is discerned that quite often fasting is observed in these religions to commemorate certain events of religious significance during specific days of the year. Moreover, feasts and festivals which occur before or after various fasting periods in the selected religious traditions remind us of the social significance of this ritual. However, sometimes fasting also signifies spontaneous individual expression of thankfulness to, or repentance before God. It is observed that fasting in these religions is envisioned to facilitate self-control, invoke mercy and sympathy for others, create the sense of bondage, establish and assert religious identities, and release the negative feelings like guilt consciousness. In the final analysis, it is maintained that as a form of asceticism fasting does not necessarily imply negation of body or society. Rather, by facilitating self-control and freedom from one's inner fears and other emotional weaknesses it can also lead to a deeper affirmation of the self and greater integration into the society.

Introduction

In religious context, fasting means deliberate self-denial of acts
like eating, drinking, smoking, and conjugal relations for spiritual or ritual purposes. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines fasting in the following words: "[A]bstinence from food or drink or both for health ritualistic, mystical, ascetic, or other religious or ethical purposes. The abstention may be complete or partial, lengthy or of short duration." Occasionally, fasting may pertain to self-restraint from speaking as well (Qurʾān, XIX:26). Scholars have noticed that fasting is common to most of the known religions of the world. In this connection, it is interesting to note that while promulgating fasting for Muslims, the Qurʾān states that it was also imposed on the previous people (Qurʾān, II:183), which implies universality of this ritual. However, practice and symbolic value of fasting vary across the religious traditions. Thus, interpretation of the symbolism behind fasting has been a subject of reflection for theologians, mystics, and historians of religion alike.

Fasting is one of the most common forms of asceticism, which has been defined as "conscious rejection of physical pleasure through continuous self-denial as a means to attain or improve spirituality." Now, scholars like Eliezer Diamond have viewed that asceticism is not simply a means to attain self-control; it is also a form of social criticism. According to this view, when an ascetic withdraws from society she or he in fact condemns it. So, can one say that the ritual of fasting simply signifies denial of the bodily needs and rejection of society for the spiritual rewards?

This paper attempts to answer such questions through a comparative study of the concept, practice, and significance of fasting in the three Semitic religions namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The paper is divided into two main sections. The first section describes teachings and theological significance of fasting in the selected religious traditions, mostly confining to the believers' point of view. This section is mainly descriptive. The second section notes some apparent parallels and contrasts between teachings of the three selected religions on the topic under discussion and then analyzes the ritual of fasting from the academic point of view. Understandably, this section is comparative and analytical and touches upon such questions as to whether the ritual of fasting implies negation of body and rejection of society? The Conclusion recounts the main findings of the study.
Theology of Fasting in Semitic Religions

a) Fasting in Judaism

Fasting in Judaism means total abstinence from every kind of food, drinks, and sexual relations. There are three types of fasts in Judaism: Statutory public fasts, non-statutory public fasts which are decreed on special occasions, and private fasts. There are altogether six statutory public fasts in a Jewish calendar year, of which some are considered obligatory while others voluntary. Originally, the Mosaic Law included only one obligatory fast, which is on the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishri). This day, known as the Day of the Atonement (Yom Kippur), is the most significant religious occasion for Jews in the whole year. The religious importance of this day has been proclaimed in the following verse of the Torah: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves and present the Lord’s offering by fire.” (Leviticus, 23:26-27; See also, Leviticus, 16:29). Though there is no direct mention of the word ‘fast’ in this verse, the commandment of “deny yourselves” has been interpreted by the Jewish religious authorities to imply a total fast from sundown to sundown. This is the most important fast in the Jewish Law and the only one explicitly proclaimed in the Pentateuch.

Later on, four more fasts were introduced, which are fasts of the seventeenth day of the fourth month (Tammuz), the ninth day of the fifth month (Av), the third day of the seventh month (Tishri), and the tenth day of the tenth month (Tevet). These fasts have been mentioned together in the following verse of Zechariah: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace.” (Zechariah, 8:19). In the book of Esther another fast has been promulgated (Esther, 9:31-32) which is considered the sixth statutory communal fast. This fast is observed on the thirteenth of the last month (Adar) of Jewish calendar. Thus, the number of the statutory communal fasts becomes six.

Two out of these six fasts are categorized as major fasts, namely
fasts of the Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av (literally means the ninth day of the month Av). The significance of Yom Kippur has been mentioned above. Tisha B'Av is actually commemoration of the first (in 587 B.C.) and second (in 70 C.E.) destructions of the Temple, both of which occurred on the same date of the Jewish calendar. The remaining three fasts mentioned in the book of Zechariah and the fast of Esther are considered minor fasts. The fasts of Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av are major also in the sense that they are observed for a longer period. They start from sunset and continue till the dusk of the following day, and thus last for about 25 hours. By contrast, the minor fasts begin with the sunrise and end with the dusk.\(^\text{13}\)

Apart from the above mentioned six statutory communal fasts, sometimes religious authorities would impose public fasts on Jews when the community used to face natural or political calamities. Such fasts can be called communal but not statutory because they are not sanctioned by the Jewish scriptures. Talmud and other codes mention many such fasts,\(^\text{14}\) however, they are seldom practised today. Only the fast of the Yom Kippur and the four fasts mentioned in the Book of Zechariah are in practice.\(^\text{15}\) For some rabbis even the four fasts mentioned in the book of Zechariah and the one mentioned in the book of Esther were obligatory only during the specific periods of time when the Jewish community faced oppressions.\(^\text{16}\)

Apart from the communal or public fasts there are many private fasts in Judaism. Some of the private fasts are undertaken to atone one's sins while the others relate to the rites of passage, occasion of marriage, and so on. Jews sometimes fast on the anniversary of the death of their beloved ones.\(^\text{17}\) Similarly, in case a Scroll of Torah is mistakenly dropped, those present at the occasion will fast for a day.\(^\text{18}\) To sum the discussion so far, there are three main types of fasts in Judaism: a) those decreed in the Bible, b) the fasts decreed by rabbis, and c) private fasts.

As regards the theological significance of fasting in Judaism, it can be known, in the first place, from the very texts and contexts of the verses which refer to the stories about, and the commandments of fasting. Some of the purposes behind biblical fasts have been summarized in the Oxford Companion to Bible,\(^\text{19}\) which include expressions of penitence (Nehemiah, 9:1), mourning for the dead (1 Samuel, 31:13), intercession (2 Samuel, 12:16), and petitions for God's aid (Judg., 20:26). At times in
the Jews' communal history, fasting functioned as the national response to catastrophes (Joel, 2:15) and as spontaneous expression of personal faith, at others (Psalms, 25:13). Then, the relationship of fasting to social justice and compassion for other human beings has also been emphasized in the following verses of Isaiah:

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah, 58:4-7).

It is interesting to note that even the religious treatises which are basically meant to codify the details of practice and ritual do not fail to mention the accompanying wisdom behind the physical deeds. For instance the Talmud refers to the story of Nineveh whom God forgave their sins because of their repentance and good deeds: “Therefore say the rabbis, ‘Our brethren, neither sackcloth nor fasting will gain forgiveness for sins; but repentance of the heart and good deeds; for it is not said of the men of Nineveh, ‘God saw their fasting and sackcloth,’ but ‘God saw their work, that they had turned from their evil ways.’ " In this context, the Talmid describes three modes of repentances: repentance expressed in words, feeling of penitence in the heart, and thirdly repentance shown by abandoning the bad deeds and turning towards the good ones.

Similarly, the famous book of Jewish law written by Solomon ben Joseph Ganzfried (1804-1886) titled Kitzur Shulchan Aruch opens the chapter on public holidays with explaining the purposes of fasting in the following words:

It's a positive commandment from the Prophets to fast on the days on which troubles occurred to our ancestors, and the purpose
of the fast is to awaken our hearts, to open (our eyes) to the ways of repentance, and it should be a reminder of our evil deeds, and the deeds of our ancestors which were like our deeds now, until this caused them and us the same troubles. Remembering these events will cause us to repent. ... The fast is nothing but a preparation for repentance, therefore, those persons, who while they are fasting, go out for an outing, and fill the day with empty activities, have caught on to the unimportant (aspect), and ignored the essence.\textsuperscript{22}

An important reference work on the Jewish religious tradition namely \textit{The Encyclopaedia Judaica} details some purposes of fasting. Fasting is seen in Judaism as a mean and not an end in itself. First and the foremost function of fasting, both public and private, is to avert calamities by appealing to God's mercy. The second purpose is to humble one's heart and to show repentance before God over one's sins, a repentance which manifests in good deeds. Another purpose behind fasting is to purify one's self in order to become near to God.\textsuperscript{23}

In the final analysis, it is viewed that contrary to the popular perception of the Jewish Law, Jewish fasting is an activity which has both inner and outer dimensions to it which are described in biblical as well as rabbinic texts. In fact, fasting is believed to be conducive to the spiritual transformation of individuals as it is believed to please God so that He may act graciously toward the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{b) Fasting in Christianity}

Jesus (Jesus) was raised among Jews and he never explicitly claimed to introduce a new religion. Most of his early followers, too, were Jews and they used to call him rabbi, a title used for the Jewish religious leaders. However, he and his followers did show a sort of indifference to some conventional Judaic practices deemed important for the Jewish clergy at that time. The ritual of fasting is one of such practices. Thus, in Matthew we find: "Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the
bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (Matthew, 9:14-15). Referring to these verses a Christian theologian argues that Jesus (םי) declined to specify any rules about fasting for his followers and did not give a clear command in this connection but anticipated at the same time that his follower would be fasting in future. Perhaps owing to this ambiguity, some Christians of Jewish origin had brought the practice of fasting to the Christian church. Thus, one can see that although Jesus (םי) criticized Pharisees over their approach to fasting, he did not dismiss the ritual itself. Rather he guided his disciples towards the spiritual and moral purposes behind fasting (Mathew, 6:16-18). However, in the early Christianity fasting was not a quite common practice, especially among the gentle or non-Jewish Christians.

It is also noteworthy that some of the earliest non-canonical sources of Christianity like Didache imply that Christians did have the idea of regular fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays during the early centuries. In the course of history, only Friday got the status of a fast day for the Christians, because they regard it as the day of Jesus’ crucifixion. From early on, the most important fast for the Christians, however, had been the fast on the day before Easter celebrations which commemorate the believed resurrection of Jesus (םי) after crucifixion. Gradually, the Easter fast was extended to one complete week and then to 40 days preceding the Easter. This period of fasting is known as Lent. Evidently, the length of this fasting period relates to the Jesus’ fasting for forty days in the wilderness. Another fasting season is Advent which starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, which can occur between 27th of November and 3rd of December, and ends on 24th of December. Advent is a commemoration of the birth of Jesus (םי) on the one hand, and waiting for his advent before the End Times on the other. Besides, there are Ember Weeks at the beginning of four seasons of the year during which the Christians fast on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.

Prior to the Vatican liturgical reforms the Christians were supposed to observe fasts of Lent and Advent during which they used to eat only one meal per day except on Sundays. They were also supposed to abstain from meat on Fridays and on certain other days in the year. However, at present fewer Catholics fast on such occasions and fasting has virtually disappeared from Catholicism even though the requirements
have been much more relaxed. Likewise, fasting has nearly, if not completely, disappeared among other the Christian denominations like Lutherans.

With regard to what the Christians abstain from during fasting, there are three types of fasts: normal, absolute, and partial. The normal fast means abstinence from eating only. Drinking water is allowed in the normal fast. This fast has been ascribed to Jesus (Jesus) in Matthew: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, he fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished" (Matthew, 4:1-2). In the King James Version of Bible word “hungered” has been used instead of “famished.” From this Christians inferred that during these forty days Jesus (Jesus) was not eating food but continued to drink water. Thus, the normal Christian fast pertains to abstinence from eating food to the exclusion of abstinence from drinking water. The second type is absolute fast which means abstinence both from eating and drinking. In the context of the conversion experience of St. Paul, it is recorded in the New Testament: “For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank (Acts, 9:9). From this verse the notion of absolute fast is derived.

The third type is the partial fast, for which the Christian theologians take recourse to a vision of Daniel recorded in the Old Testament, before which he had observed self-restraint from certain types of foods and drinks. “I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks.” (Daniel, 10:3). In this context, the Catholic Encyclopedia writes: “Fasting essentially consists in eating but one full meal in twenty-four hours and that about midday. It also implies the obligation of abstaining from flesh meat during the same period, unless legitimate authority grants permission to eat meat. The quantity of food allowed at this meal has never been made the subject of positive legislation.”

Eastern Orthodox Christianity attaches special significance to fasting. According to this tradition the ritual of fasting is divided into corporate and personal levels. At the corporate level fasting plays a vital role in constructing social connections among the faithful when they are required to “pray together for certain things in common.” At the personal level, fasting acts as a unique secret relationship between man and God which boosts the spiritual affiliation among them. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving
are regarded as “pillars of the personal spiritual practices of the Orthodox Christian Tradition.”

The most common type of fast in Christianity today is the partial fast, in which one full meal and two meatless meals, which together equal less than one full meal, are allowed. Besides, one is allowed to take drinks. Here it may be mentioned that the church today differentiates between fasting and abstinence. On a day of abstinence only meat is to be avoided. By contrast a fast day means that only one full meal plus the two smaller meals are allowed.

Christian scriptures emphasize the importance of sincerity and moderation while fasting. In this connection following statement has been ascribed to Jesus (🎅) in Matthew:

> When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil, on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew, 6:16-18).

John Piper interprets Christian fasting with an interesting metaphor of hunger for God. He refers to the following verse of Matthew: “But the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.” (Matthew, 4:19) and writes: “Desire for other things’ there’s the enemy. And the only weapon that will triumph is a deep hunger for God. ... Perhaps, then, the denial of stomach’s appetite for food might express, or even increase, our soul’s appetite for God.” Fasting, along with prayer, is also seen in the Christian theology as spiritual weapons of believers in their resistance against Satan.

Meaningfulness and purposes of fasting have been explained in the following seven categories by one of the Christian authors: First, fasting to experience the power of God in personal ministry; second, fasting for prophetic revelation of the End Times; third, fasting for the fulfillment of God’s promises to their city or nation; fourth, fasting to stop a crisis; fifth, fasting for protection; sixth, fasting for direction; seventh, fasting for
encounter and intimacy with God. It seems interesting to compare the above mentioned purposes of fasting with the ones enlisted and elaborated in another Christian source:

i) Fasting in obedience to God's Word.
ii) Fasting to humble oneself before God and obtain His grace.
iii) Fasting to overcome one's temptations and thus move into God's power.
iv) Fasting to be purified from sin.
v) Fasting to become weak before God so God's power can be strong.
vi) Fasting to obtain God's support in order to accomplish His will.
vii) Fasting in times of crisis.
viii) Fasting when seeking God's direction.
ix) Fasting for understanding divine revelation.

These comparative descriptions show how the Christian theologians take pain in explaining the meaning and significance of fasting even though the practice of fasting has become less practised in many Christian societies and denominations.

c) **Fasting in Islam**

Fasting is an important ritual in Islam. Fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan* has been esteemed as one of the five pillars of Islam in various traditions authentically ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad (NUH). Unlike some other rituals and prayers, the Qur'an itself elaborates the practical details of how and when to perform this ritual as it does explain the rationale behind enjoining fasting on believers. Two categories of fasting have been mentioned in the Qur'an: firstly, fasting during the month of *Ramadan*, which is obligatory for all adult Muslims with a few exceptions, and secondly fasting to atone certain sins. The commandment of the obligatory fasting of *Ramadan* has been elaborated in four verses of the second chapter of the Qur'an:

O ye who believe! fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that ye may (learn) self-restraint. (Fasting) for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill or on a journey the
prescribed number (should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (with hardship) is a ransom the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more of his own free will it is better for him and it is better for you that ye fast if ye only knew.

Ramadān is the (month) in which was sent down the Qurʾān as a guide to mankind also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So everyone of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting but if anyone is ill or on a journey the prescribed period (should be made up) by days later. Allah intends every facility for you He does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful. (al-Qurʾān, II:183-185).

Again the verse number 187 of the same chapter continues the injunctions about fasting of Ramadān:

Permitted to you on the night of the fasts is the approach to your wives. They are your garments. And ye are their garments. Allah knoweth what ye used to do secretly among yourselves; but He turned to you and forgave you; so now associate with them and seek what Allah hath ordained for you and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appear to you distinct from its black thread; then complete your fast till the night appears; but do not associate with your wives while ye are in retreat in the mosques. Those are limits (set by) Allah; approach not nigh thereto. Thus doth Allah make clear His signs to men that they may learn self-restraint. (al-Qurʾān, II:187).

The second category of fasting – that is fasting in lieu of certain mistakes or sins committed – has been mentioned in different places in the Qurʾān, for example in verse number 89 of the fifth chapter and verse number one hundred and ninety six of the second chapter. There is another verse, which praises those who fast for the pleasure of Allah (al-Qurʾān, XXXIII:35), whose connotation potentially includes all kind of fasts.

Another category of fasts in Islam is votive and voluntary fasts
which can be observed anytime with exception of a few specific festive
days on which fasting is not allowed. For this type of fasts certain days
of every week and month have been declared to be more meritorious
than rest of the days. For instance, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays
in a week and the “white days” in the middle of every lunar month, when
the moon is on its full and brightest, has been sanctified as Sunnah
of the Prophet (ﷺ). Likewise, fasting on the tenth day of the first month
(al-Muharram) of the Muslim calendar year has been suggested by
Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). This fast is known as ‘Ashurah (literally the
tenth day). Likewise, the fast on first nine days of the twelfth month
(Dhū al-Hijjah) is considered to be more meritorious than voluntary
fasts on other days.

In the case of Islam, several basic purposes behind institutionalization
of the fasting of Ramadan have been explained by the Qur’an itself
where it promulgates this ritual:

Firstly, “You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was
prescribed for those before you” (al-Qur’an, II:183): The ritual of fasting
gives a fundamental clue to self-understanding and self-presentation of
the Qur’an, and for that matter of Islam as a religion. As Islam is a
continuation of the eternal religion of God promulgated to every people
who ever lived on the face of earth (al-Qur’an, XXXV:24), so are the
cardinal rituals of Islam. Hence, when Muslims fast they mean to follow
the model of God’s sincere servants since ages (see for instance,
al-Qur’an, XXIII:52).

Secondly, “that ye may (learn) self-restraint” (al-Qur’an, II:183): All
the believers naturally aspire to be closest to their Lord and He had told
them that the most honoured to Him are those who are the most God­
fearing (and most righteous) (al-Qur’an, XLIX:13). However, to be
God-fearing one needs self discipline. Deliberate self-denial of basic
human needs and instincts like eating, drinking, conjugal relations during
fasts for a complete month has a potential to significantly increase
necessary self-control, which ultimately helps believers become God­
fearing.

Thirdly, “He wants you to complete the prescribed period”
(al-Qur’an, II:185): Fasting is a ritual and any ritualistic activity is by
definition characterized by performance of certain acts according to a
specific pattern, repetition, and reference to the transcendental level of
existence. This segment of the verse can be interpreted as meaning that no matter believers understand the rationale of rituals like fasting or not, they are supposed to perform it and to complete it. Thus, the ritualistic performance establishes the fact that believers have submitted their wills to their Lord. Some of His commandments may not make sense for them within the mundane level of existence but there lies a level of existence which transcends this-worldly existence. Ritualistic performance completes the circle of meaningfulness in relation to the realm of transcendence as it does in relation to the life in hereafter.

Fourthly, “to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful.” (al-Qur'an, II:185). Fasting of Ramadân commemorates revelation of the Qur'an. Apart from its function of achieving self-control, fasting in the month of Ramadân also implies remembrance of God and thankfulness to Him. Now, thankfulness is a matter of feeling by heart as it is expressed in physical actions. By obeying God and abstaining from most basic biological needs believers show their thankfulness to their Lord for sending down the gift of guidance in the form of Qur'an. Fasting relates to thankfulness in another way. Human beings tend to take for granted a lot of provisions they enjoy every day. When they are temporarily denied of these provisions they are reminded of their importance and naturally become thankful to God. Fasting reminds believers that the real source of their sustenance is God.49

Since it is God alone who knows whether a person is really fasting or not, it is considered the most personal and spiritual of all the rituals. Fasting is thus a test of sincerity of a believer in his or her faith.50 In this connection al-Imam al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111 C.E.) has divided fasting into three grades: ordinary, special, and extra-special. Ordinary fasting means abstaining from eating and drinking and sexual intimacy. Special fasting means to keep one’s body and body organs free from sin. While the highest fast – extra-special – means fasting of the heart by keeping it clean from the worldly thoughts and unworthy concerns and focusing on the remembrance of God only.51

Fasting of Ramadân is also associated with helping the needy and giving charity to the poor. At the end of Ramadân and before the festival of ‘Id al-Fitr one is supposed to give a prescribed amount of charity to the poor which is called zakât al-fitr. The holy Prophet Muḥammad (ṣ.a.w.), ordered every Muslim (who owns nişâb, the minimum amount of wealth
that makes one liable to pay charity) to give out about three kilograms of dates or barley (or two kilograms of wheat or flour that he uses normally) before going out for the special congregational prayer of ‘Id al-Fitr.\textsuperscript{52} It must be noted that zakāt al-fitr is different from the normal obligatory zakāt in that the nişāb of zakāt al-fitr is different from the obligatory zakāt. However, it is also of interest to note here that usually Muslims prefer to pay obligatory zakāt too in the month of Ramadān as any good deed performed in this month is considered more meritorious. More the same, several sins and mistakes are condoned in Islam either by fasting or by feeding the poor (see, al-Qur’ān, LVIII:3-4; V:89; V:95).\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, too old and hopelessly sick people who cannot observe fasting and do not expect to be able to do so in future, they have a choice to give certain amount as charity in lieu of fasting (see al-Qur’ān, II:184). So, fasting in Islam is closely connected to charity, both ideally and institutionally.

Fasting in Islam is also associated with moral values like patience. The Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said: “Fasting is a shield; so when one of you is fasting he should not use foul or foolish talk, if someone attacks him or insults him let him say: ‘I am fasting!’”\textsuperscript{54} Similarly, al-Ghazālī sees the purpose of fasting to feel hunger and contain desires in order to strengthen the soul in piety. For him this purpose is lost if at the time of breaking fast one lets one’s desires loose and overeats, perhaps more than the average intake in normal days.\textsuperscript{55}

A Comparative View of Fasting in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

a) Some Parallels and Contrasts

After the above discussion, it becomes possible to draw some parallels and contrasts regarding the concept and significance of fasting in the three selected religious traditions:

i) Major public fasting periods in the selected traditions are associated with events of phenomenal religious significance for the respective communities. For instance, Yom Kippur is connected to the reception of Divine Law by the prophet Moses (אַרְּם), Lent fasting period in Christianity is associated with the supposed crucifixion and
resurrection of Jesus Christ (مَسْرِعُ الْقُرْآنِ), and fasting of Ramadān in Islam is related to the revelation of the Qurʾān.

ii) There are preferred weekdays for voluntary fasting in each of the three religions: Monday and Thursday in Judaism, Wednesday and Friday in Christianity, and again Monday and Thursday in Islam.

iii) Public fasts in the selected religious traditions are often accompanied with feasts and festivals, which signify the social import of the ritual of fasting.

iv) In all these religious traditions fasting is accompanied with special prayers.

v) Fasting is a central ritual in Islam as it is deemed one of the five pillars of religion. Such centrality has been granted to the practice of fasting neither in Judaism nor in Christianity.

vi) Fasting has been institutionalized in Judaism and Islam with more or less resembling patterns in contrast with Christianity. In both Judaism and Islam practice of fasting has been elaborately regulated in religious scriptures and during fasting one has to abstain from all eating, drinking, and sexual intimacy. There is no concept of “partial” fast as one finds in Christianity.

vii) Details regarding at what time to start and break fasting differ in the religious traditions under discussion. For instance, two statutory fasts of Judaism, namely Yom Kippur and Tisha B’Av last for the longer duration than any other fast in the three religious traditions under discussion. Both of these fasts last for more than 24 hours, from sundown to sundown.

viii) Scriptures and religious authorities of the selected traditions are unanimous in their assertion that fasting should lead to actual moral and spiritual development. It seems to be a common concern in the Semitic religions that in the absence of some moral or spiritual import fasting would be a pointless activity.

ix) Some common purposes of fasting between the three religions are to seek the pleasure of God, to atone for certain sins, to tame one’s base desires, and to thank God.

x) One of the stated purposes of fasting in Judaism is mourning. By contrast, the present author has not come to know any Muslim or Christian source which states mourning to be the purpose of fasting.
b) **Fasting, Body, and Society**

Fasting is an ascetic ritual. In order to understand its meaning and significance in comparative perspective, it seems helpful to discuss what asceticism is. It has been pointed out in the foregoing pages that for some scholars asceticism is a form of social criticism. However, asceticism itself has been criticized on theological, philosophical, ethical, legal, and pragmatic grounds. It is also seen as a negation of body and its corporeal needs. Thus, as an ascetic ritual fasting might appear for some as a form of withdrawal from society and a negative approach towards human body. However, scholars like Geoffrey Galt Harpham have rightly pointed out that asceticism is an integral component of any culture. For, culture is intrinsically connected with morality, which implies some degree of self-denial and self-restraint. Similarly, Kallistos Ware opines that asceticism leads us to self-mastery and enables us to fulfill the purpose that we have set for ourselves, whatever that may be. A certain measure of ascetic self-denial is thus a necessary element in all that we undertake, whether in athletics or in politics, in scholarly research or in prayer. Without this ascetic concentration of effort we are at the mercy of exterior forces, or of our own emotions and moods; we are reacting rather than acting. Only the ascetic is inwardly free.

In this light, asceticism, and for that matter fasting, can be seen as a factor of social cohesion and self-affirmation at a deeper level. This contention is well supported by discussion of meaning and significance of fasting in the three selected religious traditions.

As the whole issue also relates to the notion of ritual, a reference to the obtaining classifications of and theorizing about rituals also seems relevant here. A pioneering sociologist and theorist of religion Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) had distinguished between negative rites (taboos) and the positive rituals (rites of passage). Improving upon this distinction, a contemporary scholar in the field of Study of Religion, namely Catherine Bell proposes classification of rituals and rites into six categories. These categories are calendrical rites, rites of passage, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, feasting-fasting-festivals, and political rites. From the point of view of the present undertaking, this classification indicates that fasting is one of the important categories
of rituals and that it is seen as intrinsically intertwined with feasting and festivals.

Now, a study of fasting in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam endorses the structural relationship between fasting, feasting, and festivals. Virtually all the important public fasting periods in the selected religious traditions are followed by feastings and festivals. For example, Esther fast in Judaism is followed by Purim feast, Lent fasting in Christianity is followed by Easter, and fasting of *Ramadan* is followed by *'Id al-Fitr* in Islam. Apparently, this interconnectedness of fasting, feasting, and festivals is not confined to the Semitic religions only. For example, a recent study on fasting in the context of Indian religions is titled as *Fasting and Feasting: Then and Now*, which clearly shows that fasting and feasting are interconnected in non-Semitic religions too.

The structural connections of fasting, feasting, and festivals obviously signifies the social import of the ritual of fasting. In other words, association of the phenomenon of festivals with various fasting periods signifies that the ultimate purpose of the ritual of fasting is not withdrawal from society rather it can lead to increased social participation. From another point of view, however, it can also be argued that this connection of fasting with feasting and festivals points to an ambivalent attitude toward body in different religious traditions. On the one hand, human body is seen as a prison for spirit and former’s biological requirements and desires are interpreted as satanic temptations, which are ritually denied in fasting. On the other hand, the fact that body is the vehicle using which spirit can actualize its potentials is also quite imposing. True that spirituality contrasts materiality, the former can be conceived of only as embodied expressions. Hence, though fasting seems to be the denial of bodily requirements, accompanying feastings signify that bodily requirements are not actually to be denied rather they are to be tamed and channelized.

From another perspective, it appears that fasting has been institutionalized in the religious traditions under discussion with a view to establish and keep intact religious identities. This is especially true for Christianity. For, the Christian movement had surfaced with a strong Jewish background and needed to claim and establish its identity as a distinct religious tradition. Thus, in the *Didache*, which is one of the important earliest non-canonical Christian writings, there is a significant statement about fasting. It reads: “But as for your fasts, let them not be
with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth days of the week, but do ye fast on the fourth and sixth day.” Obviously, the “hypocrites” mentioned in this text are the Jews. The statement implies both continuity and discontinuity of the Jewish tradition of fasting in Christianity. In other words, the Christians continued fasting but in a way different from that of the Jews. Thus, it is not difficult to conclude from the above quoted statement of Didache that the early Christians were careful about maintaining their distinct religious identity over against Judaism. Perhaps it explains why Wednesdays and Fridays were preferred over Mondays and Thursdays for weekly voluntary fasting. Perhaps this also explains why the Jewish fasts and feasts, which have clear sanction of the scriptures of Old Testament, have been seldom adopted as the Christian rituals.

Similarly, in Islam the fast of ‘Ashūrah is considered especially meritorious among voluntary fasts. Now, the case of ‘Ashūrah fast epitomizes the dual relationship of Islam with Ahl al-Kitāb (People of the Book) namely Jews and Christians. About the fast of ‘Ashūrah, there is a Hadīth ascribed to the Prophet (ﷺ), which states that:

The Prophet (ﷺ) came to Medinah and saw the Jews fasting on the day of ‘Ashūrah. He asked them about that. They replied, “This is a good day, the day on which Allah rescued Bani Isra’il from their enemy. So, Moses (ع) fasted this day.” The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “We have more claim over Moses (ع) than you.” So, the Prophet (ﷺ) fasted on that day and ordered (the Muslims) to fast (on that day).

This Tradition shows one aspect of the relationship of Islam to the previously revealed religions, culminated in a saying of the Prophet (ﷺ), “We have more claim over Moses than you.” However there are other Traditions ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), which indicate how he was also conscious to avoid ritualistic resemblance with Jews when he ordered the fasting of ‘Ashūrah. It is also narrated that he intended to fast one day before the fast of ‘Ashūrah next year in order not to resemble with the Jews. So, even today Muslims combine one more fast before or after the fast of ‘Ashūrah so that their fasting becomes differentiated from that of Jews. This example is a clear indication that,
like many other rituals, fasting has been institutionalized in the religious traditions under study with a deliberate purpose of keeping the religious identities distinct from each other.

Conclusion

It is concluded that fasting is a common religious ritual in the selected religious traditions. Some interesting similarities and dissimilarities in this connection are noted. There are some similarities in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim fasting in terms of pattern, function, and significance. Some common purposes of fasting in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are to obey God, to seek nearness to Him, to seek atonement of certain mistakes and sins, to tame one’s desires and biological instincts and gain self-control, and to thank God. However, there is no denying of the fact that certain important dissimilarities also exist. For instance, the rules and regulations about fasting have been more elaborately and strictly formulated and promulgated in Islam and Judaism than they have been in Christianity.

It is noticed that quite often fasting is observed in these religions to commemorate certain events of religious significance during specific days of the year. For instance, in Islam fasting during the month of Ramadan is associated with revelation of the Holy Qur’an and the Christian fasting of Lent revolves around the belief in the death and believed resurrection of Jesus Christ (Jesus). The commemorative aspect of fasting implies perpetual connection to the sacred time in the historic past.

Moreover, feasts and festivals which occur before or after various fasting periods in the selected religious traditions remind us of the social significance of this ritual. The strong social import of fasting is evident from the fact that all the three religions have both kinds of fasts: communal and private. Especially the communal fasts have phenomenal social dimensions. They invoke passions for others, create a sense of bondage, and last but not the least they establish and assert religious identities. However, it may not be overlooked that sometimes fasting signifies spontaneous individual expression of thankfulness to, or repentance before God. It can be argued, therefore, that the provision of both public and private fasts in the selected religious traditions signifies both
structure and freedom at one and the same time. Apparent fasting seems
to be a simple ascetic self-denial and self-restraint, however, eventually
it can also lead to a deeper affirmation of self and greater integration into
society.

Notes and References

1. This is a revised version of the paper presented at the international symposium
on Fasting and Beyond: Ramadan as a Multidimensional Phenomenon, held in
2. "Fasting," in The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed. Jacob E. Safra et al.,
3. So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye. And if thou dost see any man say ‘I have
vowed a fast to (Allah) Most Gracious and this day will I enter into no talk with
any human being.’ (al-Qur’an, XIX: 26).
4. See for instance, Tom Lansford, “Asceticism,” in Encyclopedia of Religious Rites,
Rituals, and Festivals, ed. Frank A. Salamone, New York, Routledge, 2004,
p. 37.
5. O ye who believe! fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those
before you that ye may (learn) self-restraint. (al-Qur’an, II: 183).
6. Frank A. Salamone, ed., Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals,
7. Eliezer Diamond, Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in
8. The author of this paper has come to know two works which deal with the ritual
of fasting in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The first is an MA thesis and the
other is a short booklet of about one dozen pages. The present paper, however,
differs substantially from both of them in terms of approach, analysis, and
conclusions. See Muhammad Hanif Anwari, “Al-Sawm fi al-Yahudiyyah wa-
Maslihiyyah: Dirasah Naqiyyah Muqaranah bi al-Islam” (International Islamic
University, 2004). See also, Kevin Corn, ed., Fasting and Feasting in Three
Traditions: Judaism-Christianity-Islam, vol. I, Interfaith Conversations,
Indianapolis, University of Indianapolis, 2006.
10. All the biblical quotations in this paper are from the New Revised Standard
Version (NRSV), unless otherwise stated.
11. Veronika E. Grimm, From Feasting to Fasting, the Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes
12. However, it may be mentioned here that several biblical narratives tell about the
observance of fasting by different prophets, most importantly the forty days fasting of Moses (מֹשֶׁה) when he received the Torah from God (Exodus, 34:28). Needless to say, however, that the narratives are different from commandments.


31. Mahesh Chavda, *The Hidden Power of Prayer and Fasting*, Shippensburg, PA, Destiny Image Publishers, 2007, p. 132. It may be noted that Chavda’s fast types include a fourth category that is the group fast or corporate fast which refers to the collective fasting of people of Naneveh upon admonishing of Jonah. See *ibid.*
38. Candler, The Rewards of Fasting: Experiencing the Power and Affections of God, pp. 24-34.
40. See for example, Abû 'Isâ Muḥammad b. Īsâ al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Kitâb al-Imân, Bâb Mâjâ' Buniya 'l-Islâm 'ala Khams.
41. Allah will not call you to account for what is futile in your oaths but He will call you to account for your deliberate oaths: for expiation feed then indigent persons on a scale of the average for the food of your families; or clothe them; or give a slave his freedom. If that is beyond your means fast for three days. That is the expiation for the oaths ye have sworn. But keep to your oaths. Thus doth Allah make clear to you His Signs that ye may be grateful. (al-Qur'ân, V:89).
42. And complete the Hajj or 'Umrah in the service of Allah. But if ye are prevented (from completing it) send an offering for sacrifice such as ye may find and do not shave your heads until the offering reaches the place of sacrifice. And if any of you is ill or has an ailment in his scalp (necessitating shaving) (he should) in compensation either fast or feed the poor or offer sacrifice; and when ye are in peaceful conditions (again) if anyone wishes to continue the 'Umrah on to the Hajj he must make an offering such as he can afford it he should fast three days during the Hajj and seven days on his return making ten days in all. This is for those whose household is not in (the precincts of) the Sacred Mosque. And fear Allah and know that Allah is strict in punishment. (al-Qur'ân, II:196).
43. For Muslim men and women for believing men and women for devout men and women for true men and women for men and women who are patient and constant for men and women who humble themselves for men and women who give in charity for men and women who fast (and deny themselves) for men and women who guard their chastity and for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (al-Qur’ân, XXXII:35).
45. Ibid., Bâb Śiyāmyyawm al-‘Āshūrah.
46. See, for example, Ābu 'Isā Muhammad b. ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb al-Sawm, Bāb Mājā‘ fi‘l-‘Amāl tā‘ṣī ‘l-‘Ashār.

47. Verily We have sent thee in truth as a bearer of glad tidings and as a warner: and there never was a people without a warner having lived among them (in the past). (al-Qur‘ān, XXXV:24).

48. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. (al-Qur‘ān, XLIX:13).


52. Al-Bukhārī, al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-Zakāt, Bāb Farad Ṣadaqah al-Fītr.

53. But those who divorce their wives by Zihar then wish to go back on the words they uttered (it is ordained that such a one) should free a slave before they touch each other: this are ye admonished to perform: and Allah is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do. And if any has not (the wherewithal) he should fast for two months consecutively before they touch each other. But if any is unable to do so he should feed sixty indigent ones. (al-Qur‘ān, LVI:3-4).

54. Al-Bukhārī, al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-Sawm, Bāb Ḥalq Yaqqūlūnā Sā‘īm ʻī Shātima.

55. See al-Ghazālī, Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship, pp. 78-79.


59. However, she admits that people act ritually in so many ways that these categories do not exhaust the ritual behaviour of human beings. See Catherine