

From Fasting for Allah to Living for Allah

The Strategic Significance of the Fast of Ramadan

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The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: “Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you will be questioned concerning his flock of sheep.” If a shepherd does not possess the knowledge required for rearing sheep he may not know where he should take the sheep to graze. When the sheep begin to stray he may not know how to go after them and bring them back into the flock. And when the wolves begin to circle the sheep, he may not know how to protect the sheep. Indeed there are Muslim shepherds in North America who are innocently leading their sheep directly to the wolves. Such are the Muslim leaders who engage in amateur *Ijtihad* and who then pronounce that bank interest is not *Riba* (usury). The situation in the world of Islam is even worse. There are Muslim countries today where the shepherds have been dismissed and wolves are ruling over the sheep!

The present paper is written primarily for the benefit of the shepherds of the Muslim community around the world. It is our hope and prayer that they will subject it to careful and critical attention, Insha Allah, and that it may be of benefit to them.

The Prophet (SAW) also said that Islam was built on a five fold foundation. Amongst these five “pillars” is the fast of Ramadan. In this paper an attempt is made to demonstrate how the fast of Ramadan functions as a “pillar” or a “foundation” of the house of Islam, rather than just a “window” or a “door.”

More than fifty thousand Muslim women were raped and ravaged in the full daylight of today’s New World Order by those enemies of Islam who behaved like a pack of mad dogs. Concentration camps housed Muslim men in Bosnia. Muslims were starved to death. Sarajevo was relentlessly bombarded for more than two years. The Muslims of Kashmir are oppressed and terrorized, ground to the very dust by more than half-a-million Indian armed forces. In Palestine, Muslims have suffered such extreme oppression at the hands and feet of racist European Jewish colonizers, and have been reduced to such a weak and helpless situation that they were forced to resort to an *intifada* of stones! What has the world of Islam done about Bosnia, Kashmir, Palestine and so many other bleeding stab wounds on the body of the Ummah? The Organization of the Islamic Conference could do nothing. Muslims around the world have been agonizing while their Excellencies, their Majesties, and their Royal Highnesses, who rule over the Muslims, went home, had dinner, and went to sleep! Even sincere Muslim leaders, as Dr. Mahathir of Malaysia, have simply been too weak to do anything more than

protest the hypocrisy of the West and the indifference of Muslim leaders.

The Qur'an requires of Muslim that they build Power with which to deter enemies (Al-Anfal 8:60), respond to aggression (Al-Hajj 22:39-41), and liberate the oppressed (Al-Nisa 4:75). In the process of building Power and using Power for performing such functions, Muslims would create conditions which would facilitate the recognition of the Truth of Islam by non-Muslim humanity (Al-Anfal 8:7-8).

How do we restore Power to the *Ummah*? What is the Qur'anic view of Power? Is wealth a foundation of Power? If it were then the rich peoples' army would not have been defeated by the army of the refugees at Badr! Are weapons the foundations of Power? If they were then the well-armed force of the Quraish would not have been defeated by the lightly armed Muslims at Badr! Nor would a "Super Power," the United States of America, have been defeated in Vietnam.

What, then, are the foundations of Power? Wealth, and weapons technology (including nuclear weapons), and the strength of numbers, are all important to Power but do not constitute the foundations.

Our understanding is that the foundations of Power are located in freedom, knowledge, values, faith, unity (and fraternity), discipline and leadership.

For example, the Muslim Community under the direct leadership of the Prophet (SAW) was not give permission to fight until they had Power. But permission never came while they were still in Makkah. It came only after the *Hijrah* to Madinah and only after the conclusion of the Treaty (*Meethaq*) of Madinah which gave to them political freedom. That political freedom assured for them the freedom to submit, individually and collectively, privately and publicly, to the supreme authority of Allah (SWT).

Today that freedom has been lost. Muslims are now obliged, for example, to submit to the supreme authority of enemies of Islam who control the Security Council of the United Nations Organization.

But of greater importance to us in the context of this essay is the realization that a Muslim cannot pursue an effort for restoring external freedom unless he first has achieved internal freedom. Only that Muslim in truly free (internally) who lives for Allah (SWT). Everything he does, he seeks to please Allah (SWT). It matters not whether the world is pleased or displeased with him. What the world thinks of him is irrelevant to how he determines the life he should live. Only such a Muslim is free!

Fasting is one of the most effective institutions for realizing that freedom. It is of crucial importance that we reflect upon the fact that the fast of Ramadan was not imposed upon the Muslims until just before the battle of Badr when

they had to fight for the first time! That timing was not by accident!

In a hadith *Al-Qudsi*, Allah (SWT) declares: “Fasting is for Me, and I will respond to it with any reward (howsoever great) I choose to bestow.” The lesson here is so simple and yet so Powerful. If we can fast for Allah (SWT), it opens the way for us to live for Allah and for Allah alone, regardless of the price we may have to pay. Therein lies the foundations of Power.

Thus, what this paper does, most of all, is to provide for the discerning reader a glimpse of how the fast of Ramadan contributes towards the individual and collective realization of all the foundations of Power.

We must enter a note of warning concerning the increasing number of secularized Muslims who are emerging in our midst who are either careless and indifferent with regards to the fast of Ramadan, or who do not consider it necessary to observe the fast at all. Such Muslims should understand, before it is too late, that it is in the nature of the secular society to dilute, to weaken, and to eventually render irrelevant, the distinction between the “Truth” (*Al-Haq*) and “falsehood” (*Al-Batil*), that which is “permitted by Allah” (*Al-Halal*) and that which is “prohibited by Allah” (*Al-Haram*), between conduct which is virtuous (*Al-Ma'ruf*) and conduct which is sinful (*Al-Munkar*). Without being fully aware of it, the secularized Muslim eventually lives a life which is in no way molded and conditioned by the rewards of Heaven (*Al-Jannah*) and the punishments of Hell (*Jahannam*). Indeed, secularized Muslims eventually lose consciousness of what is “sin.”

In the secular society it is not the word of Allah (SWT) which is the measure of all things. Rather man, himself, positions himself at the center of his universe, and he becomes the measure of all things. He determines what is right and what is wrong. His reason sits in judgment on anything which claims to be the Word of God. And when the Word of God does not appear to conform to man's rational predilections then the word of God must either be rewritten, or rejected or, worse, subjected to a progressive interpretation! This is called the secularization of religion. And this is the terrible fate which has befallen Judaism and Christianity in the U.S.A. And this fate has arrived at the very doorstep of the Muslims.

This fate was inevitable for Jews and Christians because they had distorted the revealed Truth. But it would be inexcusable for Muslims because the revealed Truth in the Qur'an is protected by Allah (SWT) Himself. And the basic understanding of that Truth is located in the explanations provided by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), in his personal example (*Sunnah*), and the model of a sacred society which he created!

In order to protect themselves from being completely absorbed and integrated into the new sophisticated secular

Jahiliyyah (i.e. Ignorance of Truth revealed by Allah), such secularized Muslims should make haste to learn the lesson that Islam presents to humanity an alternative model of life and of society, a model which is a rival to today's secular model. Islam's model is the "sacred" model. In the sacred model this world acquires meaning only with reference to that transcendental world from which emerges *Al-Haq*, *Al-Halal* and *Al-Ma'ruf*.

When we understand how this world relates to that world then this world, also, becomes sacred. Life becomes sacred. And woman becomes sacred (for men). Only then can we fathom the status of woman in the sacred model of life. We can then respond to the challenge posed by the secular model which, in naïvely seeking to liberate woman, is presiding over the greatest destruction of the peace and happiness of women ever the have been witnessed in history.

Through fasting we enhance our state of harmony with the sacred life and the sacred world! The sacred life is a life which is lived for the purpose of pleasing Allah (SWT)! That is the way we should live. That is the road to Power.

We pray that the reader may benefit from the information and analysis presented here and, in particular, that secularized Muslims who have stopped fasting may be persuaded to return to the life of the sacred and to the institution of fasting which does so much to remind us of the unseen world and to fortify us with the values which come from that unseen world. Without values the only future mankind can expect is one of unhappiness and frustration, and tragedy after tragedy!

May Allah accept our humble service in the cause of His Revealed Truth — Truth which can bring peace and contentment, fulfillment and success to human existence. Aameen!

FASTING IN ISLAM — ITS BASIC OBJECTIVE

In its second Surah,¹ the Qur'an addresses those who believe in it (i.e. the Qur'an) as Divine revelation and informs them of the promulgation of the compulsory fast for them. The verse (Al-Baqarah 2:183) then goes on to point out that fasting was made compulsory for all those religious communities which preceded this community of believers, i.e. the Muslims who believe in the Word of Allah (SWT) revealed in the Qur'an and who are followers of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Thus the compulsory fast is to be found Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhist and others.² The verse then ends by indicating that the objective for which the compulsory fast was promulgated is the acquisition of piety and godliness (*Taqwa*).

The Qur'anic viewpoint, therefore, is that fasting has always been an obligatory feature of the religious way of life. By instituting the compulsory fast for the religious community which followed the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the Qur'an

was simply bringing that Muslim community into a state of conformity with an essential requirement of the religious way of life.

When the Qur'an went on to point out that the basic objective of fasting was the acquisition of piety and holiness (*Taqwa*), it followed that this must also have been the basic objective of fasting in all previous religious communities established by the thousands of Prophets and guides sent by Allah (SWT) to every nation and tribe. (Al-Ra'd 13:7)

An immediate implication of this conclusion is that no religion (which claims to be founded on the One Truth) can or should condone the exploitation of the institution of fasting as a political weapon or a form of protest. And yet, in 1986, the Foreign Minister of Nicaragua, who was Catholic priest, completed three weeks of this fast-unto-death in a protest against the policies of the government of the United States of America towards the Sandanista government in Nicaragua. In much the same way the Indian leader, Mahatam Gandhi, who was a devout Hindu and a role-model of modern reform Hinduism, used fasting as a political weapon in his struggle against British rule in India.

Piety and godliness, therefore, is the criterion with which we judge the institution of fasting as it functions, not only in the religious community established by Muhammad (SAW), but in all other religions and religious communities. When fasting inculcates piety and godliness then it is functioning in accordance with its original purpose. When it does not or, rather, no longer does, then a deviation has occurred. And it behooves the followers of the deviant religion to struggle to retrieve the original objective of fasting.

While the majority of Muslims, the world over, observe the compulsory fast of Ramadan, we find in this age the unique phenomenon of large numbers of Muslims who do not fast. When we inquire into this phenomenon what we find is that it has emerged almost exclusively as a result of a considerable impact of modern Western civilization on such Muslims.

This is not surprising since modern Western civilization, which is largely constructed on secular and materialistic foundations, does not attach much practical value to piety and God-consciousness. As a consequence one comes across people who find it inconvenient to fast because it interferes with the efficient fulfillment of their professional obligations. Indeed a former President of Tunisia attempted to prohibit the compulsory Islamic fast because he claimed that it had a negative impact on productivity and thus constituted an obstacle to economic growth and prosperity. Others, who have imprisoned themselves in the comforts and luxuries of modern sensate culture (which is a feature of Western rather than Christian civilization), find fasting to be either too rigorous, or just plain inconvenient. While we shall be attempting a rational exposition of the benefits to be derived from fasting, we

should also urge such Muslims to take serious note of the fact that fasting was made compulsory by Allah (SWT) Himself. Any Muslim who challenges this and holds the view that he is under no obligation to fast is, in fact, in a state of defiance and rebellion against Allah. And since Islam connotes “submission” to the Will of Allah (SWT), it should be obvious that such a person is not in Islam, in the true sense of the word. Indeed, such a Muslim places himself outside the religious way of life altogether since the Qur’an declares: “And whosoever desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted from him.” (Aal-e-Imran 3:83)

On the other hand, the Muslim who recognizes the obligatory nature of fasting and yet does not observe the compulsory fast because of laziness, inconvenience, or whatever reason is, in fact, committing a sin and must expect to be punished by Allah (SWT) for it. Similarly, since fasting was made compulsory for those religious communities which preceded the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), it follows that the followers of those religions will also incur Allah’s punishment if they, too, fail to observe their compulsory fast.

Fasting and Power

Taqwa possesses both a moral and a spiritual dimension. In respect of its moral dimension it connotes moral rectitude which is the fruit of a Divinely-grounded vigilance, on the one hand, and the purification of the heart (*Tazkiyah*) on the other. Moral rectitude manifests itself in acts of commission (*Awamir*) and omission (*Nawahi*), i.e. performing virtuous acts required by the moral code such as “giving alms to the poor,” on the one hand, and refraining from evil acts (also prohibited by the moral code) such as acts of bribery and corruption on the other. Almighty Allah (SWT) declares in the Qur’an:

Whosoever purifies (the *nafs*) has achieved success. And whosoever corrupts it has failed. (Al-Shams 91:9)

The implication of these *ayaat* of the Qur’an is that values must be recognized as one of the foundations of Power. Indeed, there is a specific confirmation of such an implication in the chronological sequence of the revelation of the Qur’an.

After the migration from Makkah to Madinah had been effected, and shortly after victory over the Quraish at Badr, Allah (SWT) revealed the Surah entitled Al-Anfal (the Spoils of War) in which He recalled the road which had been traveled:

Call to mind (that time) when you were a small (band), weak, helpless (and vulnerable) in (your) territory, and afraid that (hostile) people would finish you off. Then (Allah) provided you with (a way to) safety and refuge, and empowered you with His aid, and provided you with wholesome

resources that you might be grateful.(Al-Anfal 8:26)

The Power to which Allah (SWT) refers was, of course, manifest in the battle of Badr. And the manifestation of that Power was of such strategic importance in the Divine scheme that Allah went on to describe it as the *Furqan*, or criterion, through which truth was distinguished from falsehood (Al-Anfal 8:29). He also says:

That it (the demonstration of Power) might serve to confirm Truth and expose falsehood, distasteful though it be to those in guilt. (Al-Anfal 8:8)

What is of critical importance for our topic is the fact that Allah (SWT) chose a moment shortly before the month of Ramadan, in which the battle of Badr was fought, to reveal the verses of the Qur'an which promulgated the compulsory fasting of Ramadan. It should be clear as daylight that the fast of Ramadan was instituted to function as a means through which the community may be empowered. If not, how can we possibly explain the long delay in promulgating the institution of fasting? Would it not have been beneficial to the oppressed Muslims of Makkah to have been given the fast of Ramadan? Would it not have enhanced their fortitude to resist the *kuffar*? The fact that Allah (SWT) waited more than fourteen years, after the commencement of the revelation of the Qur'an, to reveal the verses relating to the compulsory fast of Ramadan, is a direct indication of the relationship which exists between fasting and Power.

There is a link between fasting and Power. The link is that fasting not only builds, but also, reinforces and consolidates values, and values form an indispensable foundation of Power.

Also, since no nation, society or civilization can ever rise to greatness without establishing and sustaining the moral health of its people, it follows that the institution of fasting in religion plays a role of crucial importance in nation-building and in the process of establishing a healthy and enduring society and civilization. In fact the Qur'an goes beyond this to claim that survival, in the historical process, depends upon moral health. It does so when it declares that those who purify themselves and permit the proper growth and development of their moral being will succeed (in history as well as in the Divine scheme of things). Those, on the other hand, who corrupt themselves and, in the process, obstruct the growth and development of their moral being, will eventually perish. (Al-Shams 91:9-10) This holds true as much for the social order, the nation, and civilization, as for the individual.

The Qur'an does not merely state this thesis as a fact. It does more than that. It seeks to demonstrate the validity of the thesis by inviting attention to the historical process at work in the rise and fall of nations and civilizations. And in order to facilitate that inquiry it narrates the history of certain nations

and tribes which perished because of moral corruption consequent upon the collapse of values.

Religion and the State

The very survival of a nation or civilization is dependent on the establishment and preservation of values and the development of moral health. Religion, through its belief system of the transcendental world, is the only source of values. There are no such things as secular values. Religion, also, thorough such institutions as fasting, has a glorious record of achievement in the moral struggle. As a consequence there is an essential linkage between religion and the State, a linkage which the State can only ignore at its own peril.

The modern nation-state, built on the dual foundations of secularism and nationalism, is incapable of redefining secularism in such a way as would permit religion to function as an effective moral force in the establishment of a healthy social order. Similarly it finds itself increasingly incapable of transcending narrow nationalisms to embrace a conception of the unity and fraternity of all mankind in order that it may be able to digest the claim of religion that moral values are not only universal and absolute, but require a non-discriminatory application amongst the many different peoples in the world.

Morality and Religion

Although moral rectitude is an essential dimension of *Taqwa*, we should note that it does not function as an end in itself, nor does it function independently. Rather it depends on a metaphysics and serves goals which are essentially transcendental. It is the spiritual dimension of *Taqwa* which is really dominant. This is clear from the opening statement of the second chapter of the Qur'an which declares that the Qur'an provides (consequential) guidance for those who possess *Taqwa*. It then goes on to identify the constituent elements of *Taqwa* and singles out, as first in importance, belief in the unseen transcendental world (*Al-Ghaib*). Next comes the establishment of continuous communion with Allah (SWT) through regular prayer (*Iqamah Al-Salat*) and spending freely to assist the needy and under-privileged with the recognition of wealth as a gift from God (*Infaq*). requires belief, not only in the Qur'an, but also in all other revealed religious scriptures. And since the Qur'an does not name all those scriptures, the true religious way of life cultivates respect for all religious scriptures in the world which claim a Divine origin, and requires belief in those scriptures to the extent that one can recognize Truth in them. And then the last constituent element of *Taqwa* is unshakable faith in a life hereafter (*Al-Aakhirah*). (Al-Baqarah 2:3-4)

Taqwa, therefore, is initially dependent on the recognition that this world in which we live is not the only world. There is another world beside and beyond this world. Indeed, in comparison with that world, which is permanent and abiding, this world is temporary, transient and fleeting. (Al-

Ankabut 29:64). It will not last forever. It will one day come to an end and be transformed by its Creator into another world which will be quite different from this one. (Ibrahim 14:48)

Taqwa is dependent on the recognition that human beings will survive their physical death and will, upon the transformation of the world, be roused from the slumber of their graves to be subjected to accountability for their conduct. That day of accountability will witness the truth of all that religion stood for, and hence it is called “the Day of Religion” (*Yaum Al-Deen*). On that day Almighty Allah (SWT) will sit in Judgment over humanity and will reward and punish as appropriate. Heaven exists for reward while hell exists for punishment.

Finally *Taqwa* is dependent on belief in the transcendent unity of religious Truth (*Al-Deen*) since it requires belief in all divine scriptures and in all the Prophets. There can only be One Truth since Truth is God, and God is One! This belief in the unity and universality of Truth engenders a spirit of profound respect for “Truth” which is located in a religious community and scripture other than one’s own — even if it be a mere remnant of the Truth!

When we study the history of the evolution of religion what we find is that at its earliest stage religion was basically concerned with the organization of society and the rules of conduct conducive to the emergence of moral consciousness. This appears to be the basic purpose fulfilled in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. The historical record indicates that symbolism played a significant role in the pursuit of both these objectives. Mythology was, perhaps, a failure to understand the true meaning of religious symbolism. At the next state religion concentrated on the development of a religious psychology conducive to the proper growth and development of moral consciousness. At a still higher stage religion turned man’s attention away from this world to an almost exclusive devotion of things mystical and other-worldly. In its final form, however, with the revelation of the Qur’an, it achieved a harmonious balance in pursuing the goals of the social, moral, and mystic dimensions of human consciousness. The conception, however, of a life hereafter, of accountability, and of worship of a single Deity who was both immanent and transcendent, always formed part of religious truth even when it was only implicitly stated. This was the “substance” of Truth.

The final standpoint of religion regarding man’s earthly life is that it should not be lived as an end-in-itself. Live in this world in the manner of a traveler who is continuously conscious of the fact that his destination lies in the next world.

Living for the next world implies, in fact, living for Allah (SWT). And this brings us to yet another way at which the Qur’an looks at *Taqwa*. Religion, it would appear, evaluates all human conduct on the basis of what will “reach”

Allah and what will not. It is only the “substance” of religion which reaches Allah. Thus the Qur’an declares:

It is not the flesh and blood (of the animals of sacrifice) which reach Allah. Rather it is the *Taqwa* of your hearts which reaches Him.... (Al-Hajj 22:37)

And thus the basic objective of fasting is nothing less than the penetration of the very substance and soul of religion.

The *Taqwa* which the believer acquires while fasting is, therefore, something which reaches Allah (SWT). But before this can be achieved the human “self” must travel on a road which progressively elevates it from the physical, to the moral and, finally, to the spiritual dimensions of its existence. It must, first of all, come to grips with the purely carnal self (*Nafs Al-Ammarah*). This rebellious “wild beast” in man has to be tamed and disciplined. And fasting is one of the most effective means of controlling it.

It is in sexual immorality that the wild beast in man is at its wildest and most destructive and for this reason religion uses fasting for a direct attack on lust and carnal passion. This is achieved in Islam through the prohibition of sexual relations during the period of the fast each day and then virtually recommending sexual relations during the night which follows the day of fasting (Al-Baqarah 2:187) The partners would thus bring to bear on their sexual conduct the moral and spiritual refinement acquired during the day of fasting.

As the self turns away from the unbridled fulfillment of all the demands of the “wild beast” in man and turns towards that which can reach Allah (SWT), it is filled with regret for its past conduct and reproaches itself in this respect. This stage in the development of the self is termed *Nafs Al-Lawwamah* by the Qur’an.

Finally, as the self purifies itself and turns to Allah (SWT), it acquires *Taqwa* which reaches Allah (SWT). This is the stage of the beatified self (*Nafs Al-Mutmai’annah*). This, indeed, is the stage of spiritual excellence and it is here that religion really exists.

The beatified self, throughout history, has only tolerated its own existence in this world. It really lived in a world which transcended this world. This “turning away” from the mundane towards the sacred, away from the spatio-temporal towards the transcendental, has been the fundamental objective of all religions.

But the Qur’an did not encourage “turning away” from this world. Rather it transformed this world into a sacred world. It transformed sex into something sacred. Work, also, became something sacred. The believer was expected to live fully in this world and to strive to make a success of his life in this world. There was to be no incompatibility between living in this world and living for that world!

One cannot, however, really embark upon a journey through which the true consciousness of living for that world can be nurtured without mobilizing the ascetic element in human nature. Fasting, with its denial of that which is otherwise lawful, provides the perfect entree to the ascetic life and this, in turn, provokes the turning of the face to Allah (SWT).

Our conclusion is that Power cannot be sustained without values. And values all emerge from Truth! Therefore values cannot be established or sustained without religion. For it is religion, and religion alone, which can provide the metaphysical or spiritual requirements which make morality possible!

When Muslims fast they should be constantly conscious of the fact that religion is at work building and sustaining values which, in turn, permit Power to be established and sustained. That Power, in turn, functions as a historical force, which validates Truth. (Al-Anfal 8:8)

FASTING IN ISLAM — LAWS AND LINKAGES

The compulsory fast of Islam is to be observed during a fixed period of time (*Ayyaam Maduda*) (Al-Baqarah 2:184), and the Qur'an identifies this fixed time as the lunar month of Ramadan in the *Hijri* calendar. (Al-Baqarah 2:185)

The compulsory fast commences when the new crescent of Ramadan is visible, or when the month of Shaban (which precedes Ramadan) has completed its thirtieth day, whichever is first. The fast is observed daily from dawn to sunset. During this time one must refrain from eating or drinking anything. One must also refrain from sexual intercourse. After the sun has set and the daily fast has ended one may partake of food and drink, and may engage in sexual relations. The month-long fast ends when the new crescent of Shawwal is visible or the month of Ramadan has completed its thirtieth day, whichever is first.

In the very process of instituting fasting with an imperishable link with the lunar month — a span of time determined by nature — of which Allah (SWT) is the author, the Qur'an provides a built-in mechanism in religion which safeguards against the process of the secularization of time.

The Qur'an itself claims that it was revealed in the month of Ramadan, and this was so momentous an occasion that the believers were required to fast for the entire month in order to show their gratitude to Almighty Allah (SWT). And so Islam forged an imperishable link between the revealed scripture (the Qur'an) and fasting. Now this is a matter of great importance for, as we have already noted, the goal of fasting is *Taqwa* and *Taqwa* "reaches" Allah (SWT). The Qur'an, on the other hand, is an unbroken link between man and Allah (SWT). It is the Word of Allah (SWT) and hence possess the Divine quality of uncreated eternity. Yet it exists in a living human language (Arabic) and is thus readily accessible. The

Qur'an is, therefore, a rope from Allah (SWT), by holding on to which man can either ascend to Allah, or be drawn to Allah. (Aal-e-Imran 3:103)

In the secular society the fast of Ramadan plays the strategically important role of restoring the consciousness of the existence of the unseen world and of the revelations which have been sent from that world as guidance for mankind. Once such revelations are accepted by man he is obliged to submit to its authority.

We are also informed that the Qur'an was revealed (or sent down) on a single night in Ramadan, namely the "Grand Night" or the "Night of Power" (*Lail Al-Qadr*). Now this is a matter of tremendous importance. Ramadan is the month of the compulsory fast, and Ramadan is also the month in which exists the night the Qur'an was revealed. That night is the night of Power. There is, therefore, a clear link between fasting and Power, a link determined by Allah (SWT) Himself Who chose Ramadan for the compulsory month-long fast.

Historically, however, it is clear that the Qur'an actually reached the Prophet (through the medium of the archangel Gabriel) in bits and pieces over a period of twenty three years. The explanation for this appearance of contradiction is that when Allah said that He sent down the Qur'an in Ramadan, what He meant was that the Qur'an was sent down to the lowest heaven (*Al-Sama Al-Duniya*) in Ramadan during the "Night of Power." Indeed, it still exists there where its verses (*ayaat*) adorn the lowest heaven as lamps. (Al-Mulk 67:5) Like all the other revealed scriptures the Qur'an is described as a "light" from Allah (SWT) and therefore each verse of the Qur'an is a "light" (Qur'an Al-Taghabun 64:8). It was, therefore, from the lowest heaven that the angel Gabriel brought the Qur'an piecemeal to the heart of the Prophet (SAW) over a period of twenty three years. The first revelation came to the Prophet (SAW) on that "Night of Power" when he was meditating in the cave of Hira! Allah (SWT) chose to give to the night of the first revelation the name "Night of Power." He could have named it the night of "Truth," or of "Peace," or of "*Deen*." He did not! Since He named it the "Night of Power," the implication is that the Qur'an contains within it that through which Power can be acquired! We thus have linkages between fasting and Power, and between the Qur'an and Power!

In the establishment of a direct link between the month-long compulsory fast of Ramadan and the continuous recitation and study of the revealed scripture (Qur'an), religion has, in fact, reached a stage in its development never reached before. No other religious community was ordered to fast for as long a period as one month every year. Nor was fasting so organically linked to the recitation of the revealed scripture in any previous religious community.³ Not only do Muslims recite the Qur'an while fasting but, in addition, they perform during the nights of Ramadan, the prayers of the "night vigil" (*Qiyam Al-Lail* or *Taraweeh*) in which the entire Qur'an is

sometimes recited. This recitation, like all others in *Salat*, is always performed in the original Arabic text of the Qur'an.

Although the Qur'an recognized that other religious scriptures also possess "light" (Al-Ma'ida 5:47-49), and hence can be used in conjunction with fasting for achieving spiritual mobility, the problem which non-Muslims face is that they are seldom in a position to recite their scriptures in the original language in which they were revealed, and in which language alone they possess "light." Most scriptures no longer exist in their original language, and when they do, the language is either dead or archaic and hence not readily accessible to the believing masses. Only a very tiny fraction of Christians today have ever read the Hebrew Bible, for example.

In a very real sense, the Qur'an is, perhaps, the only revealed scripture which is readily accessible today to the overwhelming majority of those who believe in it, accessible, that is, in the original language and text in which it was revealed. This lends itself to further support for the claim of the book to be the revealed Word of God!

Fasting in Islam — The Link with Judaism

Ramadan is the month of collective spiritual retreat for the entire community of Muslims. They are permitted to eat and drink until the "white thread" of dawn is distinct from the "black thread" (i. e., until the whiteness of the day is distinct from the darkness of the night) and must then abstain from food, drink, and sex until sunset (Al-Baqarah 2:187).

Prior to the revelation of the Qur'anic verses relating to fasting the Muslims fasted without taking an early morning meal. Ibn Abbas (RAA) has commented on those Qur'anic verses as follows:

When the people offered the night prayer, they were asked to abstain from food and drink and (intercourse with) women. They kept fast till the next night. (Sunan Abu Dawood, *Kitab Al-Siyam*)

This was the way that the Jews and Christians fasted, for the Prophet (SAW) has said:

The difference between our fasting and that of the recipients of previous scriptures (Jews and Christians being specifically referred to) is eating shortly before dawn (Mishkat Al-Masabih, *Kitab Al-Siyam*).

The implication of the *hadith* is that Jews and Christians were supposed to fast without a morning meal, i.e., their fast commenced after the evening meal. In all other respects their fast for a day was similar to the Muslim fast.

With the revelation of the new *Shari'ah* (Sacred Law) the Muslims were now required to fast from dawn to sunset for the entire month of Ramadan. They were specifically permitted

to take a morning meal and were specifically permitted to go to their wives during the nights of fasting:

Permitted to you, in the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and you are their garments. Allah knows what you used to do secretly among yourselves (i.e., going to your wives during the nights of the fast when you were not supposed to do so according to the law of the Torah). But He turned to you and He forgave you. So now embrace them and seek (and enjoy) what Allah has ordained for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn is distinct from the black thread. (Al-Baqarah 2:187)

The change from the previous law of fasting to the new (as well as other such changes) is referred to in the Qur'an as *Naskh* (abrogation or supersession):

We do not abrogate any *Ayah* (revelation) or cause it to be forgotten but (that) We (replace it) with that which is superior to it or similar to it. (Al-Baqarah 2:106)

No verse of the Qur'an itself was ever abrogated. Abrogation was always with reference to previous revelations. Secondly, even when a *Shari'ah* law was abrogated for the Muslims, it still remained operationally valid for those on whom it was enforced, until, of course, they chose to enter into the Ummah of Muhammad (SAW).

In the chronological sequence of the revelation of the Qur'an there appears to be a direct link between the revelation of the verses relating to the promulgation of the fast of Ramadan, on the one hand, and the relations between Muslims and Jews (as well as Christians) on the other.

It is significant that fasting was not made obligatory on the Muslims during the thirteen years which were spent in Makkah prior to the *Hijrah*. Yet we know that the verses of the Qur'an pertaining to fasting had already been sent down to the lowest heaven on the "Night of Power" (Al-Qadr 97:1) It was therefore on the basis of deliberate Divinely ordained chronological sequence that this particular revelation (and all other revelation) was sent down at the time when it was sent down.

The point we are about to argue is that the chronological sequence, as it pertains to fasting, appears to have been determined by the Jewish attitude towards the Prophet (SAW) and his message.

On arrival in Madinah, after the *Hijrah*, the Prophet (SAW) did two things which were profoundly significant for Christians and Jews.

Firstly, he performed his prayers (*Salat*) while facing in the direction of Jerusalem, and ordered all his followers to do likewise. The Jews held Jerusalem to be their spiritual capital (and *Qiblah*). The Christian attachment to Jerusalem was so profound that Euro-Christianity waged, in the medieval age, several crusades in an attempt to wrest control of the city from Muslims. In establishing Jerusalem as the first *Qiblah* of the Muslims the Prophet (SAW) dramatically impressed upon the Jews and Christians his link with David or Hadrat Dawood (AS) and Solomon or Hadrat Sulaiman (AS) who, as Prophet-Kings, had established the holy city of Jerusalem; with the Temple built by Hadrat Sulaiman (AS); and with the Rock (*Sakhrat*) which Jews and Christians held to be sacred because of their belief that it was associated with the momentous sacrifice of Abraham or Hadrat Ibrahim (AS).

Our analysis is that this act of the Prophet (SAW) was supposed to facilitate their assessment and acceptance of his claim to be the Prophet about whom both Moses or Hadrat Musa (AS) and Jesus Christ or Hadrat Isa (AS) had spoken. But Allah (SWT) knows best!

Secondly, he fasted with the Jews on the days when they fasted and in accordance with the Law of the Torah. Thus, as stated earlier, the fast commenced after the night prayer and did not end until the next night. And during the time of fasting food drink and sex were prohibited.

The Jewish law can still be located today in Leviticus (23:26-32) where, in respect of The Day of *Atonement* (*Youm Kippur*), the Torah states as follows:

It shall be as Sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial (i.e., fasting); on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall observe this your Sabbath.

The decision by the Prophet to fast with the Jews served to reinforce the previous decision (to pray in the direction of Jerusalem) in impressing upon the Jews in Madinah (and Christians in Palestine, Syria, South Arabia, and Abyssinia) that he recognized the Torah as Divine revelation.

Our assessment is that this act of the Prophet (SAW) was also supposed to facilitate Jewish assessment and acceptance of his claim to be the Prophet for whom they were, in fact, waiting. But Allah knows best!

Fully seventeen months elapsed, after the arrival of the Prophet (SAW) in Madinah, before the Jewish rejection of the Prophet and their open animosity towards him (as well as Islam and the Muslims) became manifest. The event which triggered their open hostility, and which exposed in public what was concealed in their hearts for some time, was the conversion to Islam of their learned Rabbi, Abdullah Ibn Salaam (RAA).

Abdullah Ibn Salaam (RAA) came with his entire family to the Prophet (SAW) and took the *Shahadah*, thus recognizing Muhammad (SAW) as the awaited Messenger of Allah whom the Jews were expecting. In doing so he affirmed that Allah (SWT) had chosen, as His final messenger, one who was not a Jew. The implication of this was that Allah (SWT), in His final chapter of revealed Truth, had chosen not to honor the People of Israel. With the acceptance of the Prophethood of Muhammad (SAW) by their own learned Rabbi, the moment of truth had arrived for the Jewish people.

This was the bitter truth. Allah (SWT) had fulfilled His promise to Hadrat Ibrahim (AS): “I will make thee an Imam (leader) to mankind” (Al-Baqarah 2:124). But in order to do so He had to turn away from the seed of Isaac or Hadrat Ishaq (AS), i.e., the Jewish People, and turn, instead, to the seed of Ishmael or Hadrat Isma‘il (AS), namely the Arabs. There was a reason for this. And it was that which was unpalatable to the Jews.

When Allah said to Hadrat Ibrahim (AS): “I will make thee an Imam to mankind,” he pleaded: “And also (Imams) from among my offspring!” Allah answered: “My promise will not embrace the wicked (from your offspring)” (Al-Baqarah 2:124) The majority of the Jewish people had committed acts of wickedness. Allah (SWT) recounted some of those acts of wickedness:

... We commanded them: “Transgress not in the matter of the Sabbath,” and we took from them a solemn covenant. (They have incurred divine displeasure) in that they broke their Covenant; that they rejected the signs of Allah; that they slew the Messengers (of Allah) in defiance of right; that they said: “Our hearts are enfolded in covers (which preserve Allah’s Words — We need no more); nay, Allah has set a seal on their hearts because of their blasphemy, and little is it they believe; that they rejected faith; that they uttered against Maryum a terrible false charge; that they said (in boast) “We killed Christ, Isa the son of Maryum, the Messenger of Allah Because of the wickedness of the Jews We have made unlawful for them (many) good things which previously had been lawful for them. (We have done this also) because they obstructed (and led astray) so many from the Path of Allah. And (because) they took usury (*Riba*) although they were prohibited from doing so; and because they cheated people of their wealth” (Al-Nisa 4:154-161)

It was because of that wickedness which had defiled the descendants of Hadrat Ishaq (AS) that Allah (SWT) had to turn to the descendants of Hadrat Isma‘il (AS) for the last

Prophet. Abdullah Ibn Salaam (RAA) was able to swallow pride and embrace the Divine verdict against the Jews when he recognized Muhammad (SAW) as the Prophet of Allah. The Qur'an affirms that the Jews, also, were all able to recognize that which their Rabbi affirmed: "The people of the Book know this (that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah) as they know their own sons" (Al-Baqarah 2:146). What they could not swallow was the fact that he was not a Jew but an Arab. Had he been a Jew it was quite possible that they would have accepted him. Although this, also, was not certain, since both Hadrat Yahya (AS) and Hadrat Isa (AS) were Israelites, and yet they rejected them both.

When Abdullah Ibn Salaam (RAA) took the *Shahadah* and recognized Muhammad (SAW) as the Prophet of Allah, he asked the Prophet to conceal the information until the Jews had been questioned concerning his status. The Prophet acceded to his request and kept the information secret. He then questioned the Jews concerning Abdullah Ibn Salaam (RAA). They replied: "He is our Rabbi, the most learned and respected of us all." Then Abdullah (RAA) came before them and announced that he had recognized Muhammad (SAW), the Arab, as the Prophet of Allah.

The Jews cursed their Rabbi, insulted him, vilified him, and pored out all their pent up and concealed hatred for the Holy Prophet (SAW). They then resorted to such tactics of deception against the Prophet (SAW) to which even pagan Makkah had never resorted. They sent some of their Rabbis to feign conversion to Islam so that they could penetrate the ranks of the Muslims and plant from within the seeds of doubt and suspicion concerning the Prophet (SAW). They also sent a young Jew to recite the events of the Day of *Bu'ath* when the Aws defeated the Khazraj. The youth performed so well that he succeeded in arousing the old tribal passions and very soon the two tribes were facing each other ready for armed conflict. It was the timely intervention of the Prophet (SAW) which averted what would have been a great tragedy.

Allah responded to the Jewish hostility to the Prophet (SAW) with a revelation which condemned them in very harsh language:

... Is it ever so that (O Jews), every time a prophet comes to you with what you yourselves do not like, you take to false pride and arrogantly reject some and kill others? And they say: "Our hearts are enfolded in covers." In fact, Allah has cursed them for their disbelief. Little are they convinced of the Truth. And when the Book which came from Allah and which confirmed their own scripture was brought to them — even though before it they used to pray for victory over the unbelievers — but now that the same Truth which they had known beforehand has come, they renounce

it. Allah's curse is on the disbelieves. (Al-Baqarah 2:87-89)

Allah also warned the Prophet (SAW) and the Muslims concerning the Jews:

... beware of them, lest they sway you away from some of the guidance sent down to you by Allah. If they turn away, know that Allah is sure to punish them for some of their misdeeds. Most of them are transgressors. (Al-Ma'ida 5 49-50)

It was shortly after this, in the month of Shaban in the year 2 A.H., after the Muslims had prayed in the direction of Jerusalem for seventeen months, that Allah (SWT) sent down the revelation ordering the Muslims to pray in the direction of the *Kaaba* in Makkah. Allah (SWT) explained the purpose of the change in *Qiblah*, that the whole question of the orientation in prayer was intended by Him to sift the true believers from the apostates and deceptors (Al-Baqarah 2:143).

And it was in that same month of Shaban (just one month before Ramadan) that Almighty Allah (SWT) also revealed the verses which promulgated the compulsory fast of Ramadan for the Muslims.

Link of Fasting to Sex and Chastity

In their month-long retreat during the fast of Ramadan Muslims are specifically permitted, as we noted earlier, to approach their wives during the night which follows the day of fasting. This union of husband and wife during the nights of Ramadan injects a spiritual content into sexual relations and then elevates that spiritualized sex to a status worthy of participation in a spiritual retreat. What Islam achieves here is nothing less than revolutionary, for the satisfaction of the sexual needs of man have almost universally been held to be incompatible with his highest spiritual strivings. The religious mind through the ages has maintained an aloofness from sex-life which it has either held in contempt or reluctantly tolerated. Islam makes a break with the immediate past and works for the integration of man's sex life into the period of his most intense and sustained spiritual mobilization. In doing so it spiritualized the sex bond and establishes a philosophy of sex which is the *sine qua non* for the emancipation of woman in this modern age.

So long as sex is considered to be incompatible with man's spiritual strivings, woman's status in society will always be problematic. Such a philosophy of sex, which excludes sexual life from the world of the sacred, and which recognizes no reality for woman beyond her material reality, almost naturally causes man to eventually approach woman for the satisfaction of lust and base carnal passion. Whensoever this occurs the mind creates an image of woman as a toy, a plaything, and an object to be used and abused; and herein lies the explanation for the continued exploitation of woman in the

modern world. The Feminist movement in the Western world seems to have completely overlooked this aspect of the problem.

As soon as sex is spiritualized, as it is in the fast of Ramadan, man approaches woman with light rather than lust. And in the flame of spiritual illumination sex attains a status which is truly sacred, a gift from God through which a man and woman attain peace, tranquillity, intense pleasure and contentment and most important of all, a union and unity which facilitates the approach to The One. It is in this context that we can properly examine the statement of the Prophet (SAW): "These (things) have been made dear to me (by Allah) in this world of yours — women, and fragrance (of perfume); and prayer has been the cooling of my eyes." Ibn Arabi, in his famous work *Fusus Al-Hikam*, comments on this saying of the Prophet (SAW) in some detail:

Then God drew forth from him (namely man) a being in his (i.e., man's) own image, called woman, and because she appears in his own image, man feels a deep longing for her, as something yearns for itself.... Thus, women were made beloved to him....³

For Ibn Arabi the love for woman is founded on the conception of woman as a being who emerged from man. Now whatever may be the merits of this notion of woman (which is basically a Christian conception) on which Ibn Arabi bases his explanation of the statement of the Prophet (SAW), it does not appear to be supported by the Qur'an which speaks of spiritual creation of the male and the female from the same *nafs* (self). From that single *nafs* did Allah (SWT) create its mate (Al-Nisa 4:1). No gender has been specifically recognized for that original *nafs*.

In so far as biological creation is concerned, the Qur'an says that Allah (SWT) has caused (all) mankind to emerge from the earth in the manner of trees and plants (Nuh 71:17). It also states that the *nutfa* (sperm) becomes an *alaqa* (the embryo which clings to the wall of the womb). And it is at this stage that Allah (SWT) causes either the male or the female to emerge. (Al-Qiyamah 75:37-39)

Ibn Arabi, however, is more convincing when he speaks of woman as medium in which, and through which, man can contemplate God:

When a man loves a woman, he seeks union with her, that is to say the most complete union possible in love. And there is in the elemental sphere no greater union than that between the sexes. It is precisely because such desire pervades all his parts that man is command to perform the major ablution (i.e. to take a bath after sexual intercourse). Thus the purification is total, just as his annihilation in her was total at the moment

of consummation. God is jealous of His servant that he should find pleasure in any but Him, so He Purifies him by the ablution, so that he might once again behold Him in the one in whom he was annihilated, since it is none other than He whom he sees in her.⁵

Indeed woman is the most perfect such medium, according to Ibn Arabi:

Contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God in His Essence, is far beyond all need of the Cosmos. Since, therefore, some form of support is necessary, the best and most perfect kind is the contemplation of God in women.⁶

It is important that we should note that the Prophet (SAW) said: “Three things have been made dear to me” He did not say: “Three things did I love.” The implication is that it was the Divine will which ordained that women be loved more than all the world. The reason, as Ibn Arabi explains, is that of all the *Ayaat* or signs of Allah (SWT) which exist in the world, woman is the closest *Ayat Allah* (sign of Allah) to man. She is the closest “window” to heaven! Hence man should approach woman with the respect which is due to the sacred. And, through woman, he should seek to approach his Lord.

Yet another approach to the subject is to be found in Dr. Fazlur Rahman Ansari’s observations that “the satisfaction of the sexual need bears a certain relationship with an expansion in man’s spiritual release.”⁷ This is not to say that the celibate is incapable of spiritual progress. It is rather a view to the effect that in negating sex in order to pursue spiritual growth, man is, in fact, disregarding an in-built mechanism in his own nature which constantly balances the physical and the spiritual.

Finally we may note that the spiritualization of sex, which is initiated in fasting, makes a significant impact on sexual morality since it establishes the firmest possible foundations for chastity. It is in the context of the permission to approach wives during the nights of Ramadan that the Qur’an finds it appropriate to observe that: “They (your wives) are apparel for you, and so are you for them” (Al-Baqarah 2:187). Thus when a husband goes to a woman other than his wife for his sexual satisfaction, he is, in fact, depriving his wife of her clothing and thus subjecting her to a certain kind of nakedness with all its attendant vulnerability, embarrassment, and shame. Chastity is an imperative for stable and happy family life. And this is the foundation of the stable family unit without which an enduring civilization cannot be established.

Link between Fasting and Charity

In much the same way that the Qur’anic stamp of approval for sexual relations during the nights which follow

the days of fasting leads to the spiritualization of sex and chastity, so too, does the Qur'anic exemptions from the compulsory fast for those who are ill or on a journey, permitting them to make up for the missed days after Ramadan, lead to a certain religious pragmatism, realism, and moderation. When religion ceases to be realistic and practical it soon loses its appeal to the masses. It is precisely for this reason that the Qur'an comments, in the context of the exemptions: "God intends every facility for you: He does not want to put you to difficulties" (Al-Baqarah 2:185).

Those, on the other hand, who are permanently incapable of fasting either because of the nature of their illness or because of the disabilities of old age, are permitted to feed the poor in lieu of fasting. And this reference to charity brings us to the social dimension of fasting. Ramadan is the month when Almighty Allah (SWT) is most charitable to His creatures. Thus the Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said: "When Ramadan begins the gates of heaven are opened... the gates of mercy are opened... the gates of hell are locked and the devils are chained." Indeed during Ramadan: "... some are freed from the Hell by Allah (SWT), and that happens every night. This generosity and charity from above also found expression in the life of the Prophet (SAW) who, according to Ibn Abbas (RAA), "When the month of Ramadan began, set every prisoner free and gave to every beggar."

As a consequence, spending freely of one's substance in charity is an integral part of the institution of fasting in Islam. It is significant that the compulsory fast of Ramadan was not promulgated by the Qur'an until the Muslims had migrated from Makkah and had settled themselves as an organized community in Madinah. This was so precisely because fasting in Islam is not a strictly private affair but has a social function to perform in alleviating the condition of the poor, the destitute, the under-privileged, and the weak in the society. So integral is this care for the poor and needy to the religious way of life that the Qur'an considers its neglect to be a repudiation of religion:

Have you observed the one who repudiates religion? Such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness) and encourages not the feeding of the indigent. So woe to the worshipers who are neglectful of their prayers. Those who want (but) to be seen (of men) but refuse (even) small kindnesses.
(Al-Ma'un 107:1-7)

It should be clear that the institution of fasting in Islam makes a vitally important contribution to Islam's championing of that noble cause. Indeed what Islam accomplishes in fasting is nothing less than the spiritualization of charity, for this is the implication of the linking of charity with fasting.

The momentum generated in the month of Ramadan in respect of the spiritualization of charity, is enhanced at no less a place than the house of God itself (the *Kaaba* in Makkah), when during *Hajj* and *Umrah*, the pilgrim who is forced by illness to shave his hair before the completion of the rites, is required to compensate for this either by fasting or by feeding the poor (Al-Baqarah 2:196). Thus even in the House of Allah (SWT) Himself, fasting and charity have the same status.

In a contemporary world in which “aid” as a form of imperialism and a means of control is so common, Islam’s spiritualization of charity is sorely needed.

Link between Fasting and Human Freedom and Dignity

The Qur’an states that the Divine compensation which is exacted for accidental homicide by a Muslim of a Muslim includes “freeing of a believing slave” or, for those who find this beyond their means, “fasting for two months.” (Al-Nisa 4:92). Hence the freeing of slaves is invested with a special degree of spirituality in Islam since it is equivalent in status to prolonged fasting. This is an achievement of great significance indeed for it permits the process of the dismantling of the institution of slavery to proceed in a manner which ensures the full rehabilitation of the freed slaves.

The negative after effects of slavery and, in particular, the damage to the human personality, are still very visible in the western hemisphere more than a century after the abolition of slavery in Western civilization. The descendants of freed slaves in the United States of America are yet to be successfully integrated into the American society. The explanation of this pathetic situation lies in the fact that slavery was abolished in response to basically economic compulsions. Humanitarianism appears to have played a minor role in the whole affair. No evidence exists of any significant spiritual motivation in the dismantling of the institution of slavery. (See the excellent work of Dr. Eric Williams, entitled *Capitalism and Slavery*.)

We wish to suggest that this is the basic reason why western civilization has been able to live with, or at least to tolerate Western-imposed apartheid on the soil of the very continent from which the West enriched itself by enslaving a free people. In other words, apartheid is a manifestation of the spiritual bankruptcy of secular western civilization.

In India, on the other hand, the caste system imposes a very real form of slavery on millions of people in that hapless country. It is of crucial importance to note that there is a form of color discrimination which is involved in the caste system. The fair-skinned Aryan is never at the bottom of the social order. That is reserved for the dark-skinned indigenous Indians. Although the caste system has been denounced by many great Hindu spiritual and religious leaders and Hindu reform movements, as well as being made illegal by the Indian constitution, it continues to survive and to impose terrible

sufferings on low caste and casteless Hindus to this day. In Christianity as in Hinduism, there appears to be no basic linkage between fasting on the one hand, and the recognition of human freedom and dignity on the other. And it is the consequent inability to mobilize the spiritual consciousness and bring it to bear on such social problems as caste in India, apartheid in South Africa, and the integration of the descendants of freed slaves into American society which explains the continued existence of these manifestations of social cancer.

Islam's basic achievement really lies in the functional linkage it has established between fasting, on the one hand, and charity, chastity and recognition of human freedom and dignity, on the other. The one envelops the others in a spiritual embrace of profound practical consequences.

BETWEEN THE TWO NIGHTS

The *Mi'raj* or ascension of the Prophet (SAW) to the special Divine presence took place on Rajab 27. This date appears to be linked in the Islamic calendar to Ramadan 27, the likely day of the "Night of Power," or the *Lail Al-Qadr*.

It seems that this period of two months is a special season in which the collective spirituality is progressively enhanced until finally the individual effort of even the average worshiper elevates him to eligibility for some form of religious experience. This, in turn, launches him on a path of spiritual growth.

The progressive enhancement begins on Rajab 27, when the worshiper refreshes his memory about the Prophet's *Mi'raj* and reminds himself that the five daily prayers (*Salat*) which was "brought down from above" in the *Mi'raj*, is the vehicle for his personal *Mi'raj*. He thus pays serious attention to improving the quality of his *Salat*. This involves, most of all, developing a devout frame of mind.

In the month of Shaban he follows the example of the Prophet (SAW) and fasts a trial-run, really, to prepare the body and the mind for the rigors of the fast of Ramadan. Thus the preliminary fast of Shaban is added to (*Salat*) and worship moves into a higher gear. On Ramadan 1, not only does the compulsory fast for all adult Muslims begin but, also, there is *Qiyam Al-Lail* or the prayers of the night-vigil, when it is customary for the entire Qur'an to be recited. Fasting, the night time prayer vigil and the recitation of the Qur'an have a dramatic impact in effecting a substantial qualitative improvement of worship.

When, on Ramadan 21, the withdrawal from worldly affairs and seclusion in the mosque (*Ai'tikaf*) for ten days commences, the worshipers reach a pitch or intensity of worship which makes this period most spiritually conducive for religious experience.

Finally comes Ramadan 27, the "Night of Power" (*Lail Al-Qadr*) when Allah (SWT) sends down the angels and

Gabriel for “every errand,” (Al-Qadr 97:4), i.e., to bestow, among other things, the supreme gift of *Mi'raj* to all those who have deserved it or who have earned it.

When the Qur'an asserts that the “Night of Power” is superior to a thousand months, (Al-Qadr 97:3), the implication is that which can best be experienced on that night (namely spiritual experience which launches spiritual growth) is better than an entire life-span (a thousand months standing for an average life-span) lived without it.

There are profound psychological and sociological lessons to be learnt from Islam's fast of Ramadan. The enhanced collective spirituality of Ramadan, for example, literally reaches down to embrace even the weakest of the believers and to assist and strengthen his resolve to observe the fast.

Secondly, with the institution of the fast of Ramadan and its attendant charity, prayers, and the recitation of the Qur'an, Islam takes the believer to the third stage of the process of religious development, the stage of total conformity and harmony with the externally imposed sacred law.

In the first stage, we should recall, the individual was invited to enter into Islam and to submit publicly to the Truth. In the second stage, on the other hand, the process witnessed the internalization of the externally proclaimed belief. This was the stage of faith or *Iman*. With the fulfillment of stage three, or total conformity with the sacred law, the stage is now set for that spiritual growth (through *Al-Shari'ah*, *Al-Tariqah*, *Al-Ma'arifah* and *Al-Haqiqah*), which is the true goal of the religious way of life.

FASTING AND THE PHYSICAL BODY

We eat and drink for energy, which we then burn up when working or playing. When we generate greater amounts of energy than we actually use we then end up with excess energy and this is stored in the body as fat. There are two ways through which we can get rid of fat, and that is either by rigorous exercise which burn up a lot of energy rapidly, or by fasting. When we are fasting, we still need energy to meet our daily requirements. When the source of energy through food and drink is limited the body uses its stored energy. In this way we get rid of excess fat.

By reducing or eliminating excess body fat every year during the fast of Ramadan fasting makes an important contribution to physical health.

It should be obvious, however, that this elimination of excess fat will not be achieved if one fasts for the whole day and then, at the time of breaking the fast, eats three times as much food as one would normally eat. In fact this overeating after a long day of fasting can have a distinctly negative impact on health.

The human body, like a motor car, needs to be serviced at regular intervals. By changing spark plugs, points, condenser, oil, oil filter, etc. and then “tuning” the engine, the car works better and more efficiently. There is, in addition, an increase in the life of the car. Similarly, the human body needs to be serviced and Islam achieves the servicing of the body during the fast of Ramadan. While fasting, a number of bodily organs (particularly the digestive organs) are rested and thus serviced. This servicing restores human health and increases man’s longevity.

Physical strength cannot be sustained without good health, and fasting is essential for the maintenance and the preservation of good health. Indeed fasting helps in the cure of many illnesses! The question is: Does Islam establish a link between physical strength and Power? And the answer is: Yes, it does!

When the Israelites questioned the Divine choice of Saul (or *Taloot*) as their king on the grounds that he was not a man of wealth, Allah (SWT) responded and pointed out that Saul was eligible for the status conferred upon him because he possessed knowledge and (physical) strength. (Al-Baqarah 2:247)

Fasting and Creativity

In order to realize his potential, man must achieve in his life-pattern a balance between continuity and change. As soon as he becomes stuck in a permanent syndrome of routine and habits, he shuts out from his life fresh and new vistas, and that expansion of the mind and the spirit which exists within him as a potential realization. A temporary change from daily routine to something different can release creative energy, refresh the mind, and restore strength and vitality to a body which may have become tired and stuck in a daily routine.

In the fast of Ramadan the believer experiences just such a change. The change is effected in the realm of man’s biological existence and interferes with the daily routine in respect of food, drink and sex. The change is so fundamental, so disruptive of daily routine, that the believer lives a different life in Ramadan. This movement from routine, not only refreshes the body and restores vitality but, more importantly, releases creative forces with the potential of penetrating worlds that were hitherto inexperienced and unexplored by the believer, worlds which transcend his normal experience.

Sharing Hunger with the Destitute

Abstinence from food and drink from dawn to sunset forces on the believer the personal experience of hunger and thirst. In the crucible of personal experience he learns of what suffering the poor and destitute must bear. As a consequence of the acquisition of this understanding of poverty, the believer’s heart and mind is opened for the development of greater sympathy for the poor and greater feelings of charity, kindness, and generosity. And these surely are virtues which

lift men and societies to honor and greatness in the march of history.

Fasting and the Value of Food

Abstinence from food and drink from dawn to sunset and the consequent experience of the pangs of hunger and thirst impresses upon the consciousness of the believer the value of food and drink. Food and drink or sustenance is not a thing to be taken for granted, not a thing to be wasted. Rather it is providence (*Rizq*) and hence sacred. The spirituality generated during the long day of fasting invests the food and drink with which the fast is broken with what can most appropriately be termed “sacramental value.”

Respect for food and drink in turn protects one from the abuse of food and drink — as well as over — indulgence in either or both. That the world is in need of proper respect for food is demonstrated year after year in some of the most affluent countries in the world where food is destroyed in order to prevent prices from tumbling in a market which is flooded.⁸

THE LAST WORD

The Ummah of the Prophet (SAW) is in a very sorry state today. Despite the Divine command to build Power to the maximum extent possible the Ummah is weak and helpless, as weak, helpless and vulnerable as it was in Makkah. At that time the Prophet (SAW) led the community, with Allah’s help, to that state of Power with which they succeeded in defeating the enemy at Badr.

Today’s Ummah has a primary obligation to restore Power! There is no other subject more important to Muslims today than the restoration of Power, that Power which can function as an effective deterrent to the enemy, which can be used for responding to aggression and for liberating the oppressed and tyrannized, and through which the Truth can be seen more clearly by mankind to the Truth. These are the functions of Power as established in various *ayaat* of the Qur’an. If that Power is not restored then the consequence for the world of Islam will be more Bosnias, Kashmirs, and Palestines. There will be universal *Fasad* (corruption and disarray) on earth and the misery will fall on all, not just on the guilty. The Muslims, however, will face the brunt of the suffering. To avert that fate which is already at our doorstep, we need to restore Power.

We learn from the *Seerah* that the foundations of Power must first be established before we can actually take the battlefield. This is the significance of the thirteen years in Makkah, the *Hijrah*, and the first year in Madinah. The foundations of Power are freedom, knowledge, values, faith, unity and fraternity, leadership, and discipline. A study of the main points made in this paper reveal that the institution of the collective fast of Ramadan makes a significant contribution

towards developing and sustaining *all* those foundations of Power.

Our appeal to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual guides of the contemporary Ummah is to direct urgent attention to the following:

1. Articulate the relationship between fasting and Power; why else, indeed, did Allah (SWT) delay the promulgation of the new *Shari'ah* regarding fasting until after the first Ramadan in Madinah?
2. Work for the recognition of the strategic input which the fast of Ramadan is supposed to make in the development of Power; this input being described in the development of values, in winning inner freedom, in facilitating the penetration of the transcendental foundations of knowledge, in strengthening faith, in uniting the community, in developing a life of self-discipline, etc.
3. Mobilize Muslims in such a way that the fast of Ramadan may actually result in that input for Power being achieved individually and collectively. Aameen!

Endnotes

¹ It is interesting to observe that after the opening chapter of the Holy Qur'an, which is itself named "Opening Chapter," the next chapter is entitled the Chapter of the "Cow." While the choice of this name is linked to the worship of the cow in Jewish history which is found in the chapter (Al-Baqarah 2:67-71), it also has great significance for Hindus who consider the cow to be a holy animal. Now the choice of the cow, which performs the wondrous feat of eating grass and producing milk, as a holy animal, can be considered to have been a preliminary step in the evolution of the religious copiousness, leading eventually to the recognition of *all* animals as sacred. Similarly the choice of the Ganges as a holy river and Bharat as a holy land would lead eventually to the recognition of *everything* in this universe as holy and sacred. And this is a position which can only truly be sustained with the recognition of the world as real and as God's creation. Secondly, the world and all it contains must be recognized to be functioning as a medium which leads the developed religious consciousness to God. And this, of course, is the position of Islam itself which embraces a spiritual interpretation of the universe, a universe which overflows with the "Signs of Allah" (the *Ayaat Allah*). And the Signs of Allah (SWT) lead directly to Allah Himself.

² David is mentioned in the Bible as having fasted for seven days (Samuel 12:16-17). Moses fasted in order to show gratitude to God for the deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh and also for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29). Jesus Christ not only kept fasts but also commanded his followers to fast (Mathew 6:15-17, Luke 5:33-35, Acts 13:23). May Allah's blessings be upon them all.

³ Muslims, indeed, are so fond of reciting the Qur'an while fasting that the writer was amazed when, as a young student just arrived in Cairo, he found so many people reciting the Qur'an while traveling in crowded buses to work in the mornings of Ramadan. Some, in fact, were standing in those packed buses with one hand clasping the Qur'an and the other holding the rail.

⁴ Ibn Arabi., *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translated by R.W.J. Austin (London: SPCK, 1980) p. 274

⁵ Ibid., p. 274

⁶ Ibid., p. 275

⁷ Answer to a question posed to Dr. Ansari by the author.

⁸ Even among Muslims the respect for food is now sometimes lacking, a thing unknown in the past in Islamic civilizations. The writer recalls with horror the spectacle of Arab students dining in the common hall of the Karachi University students hostels and, upon the completion of their meal, wiping their hands clean with the soft flat bread which was prepared for their meals.