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ACADEMY

# Fasting in Different Traditions

Fasting the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is an obligation upon sane, mature, and able Muslims, once a year during the month of Ramadan.

However, fasting is not specific to Muslims. For thousands of years, people have fasted in one way or another. Some fasted for religious reasons and others fasted due the health benefits. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates all considered fasting a method of therapy.

Other religions and cultures also have forms of fasting. Let us look at some of these examples from other religions.

# Judaism – Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is the only day of fasting prescribed upon Jews. It is mentioned in Leviticus 16:29–31. At the beginning of the Jewish New Year, Jews observe ten days of repentance. This is a time in which they reflect upon the sins of the previous year and repent. These ten days end with Yom Kippur. Jews believe that on this day the fates of all Jews are sealed for the coming year. As such, it is a solemn day that involves grieving for past sins and praying for forgiveness.

On Yom Kippur, Jews fast for 25 hours – from sundown of the previous evening until sundown the following night. During this time, it is not permitted to eat, drink, work, have sexual relations, bathe, use ointments, or wear leather shoes. It is also customary amongst many Jews to fast on the eve of the New Year. This day is known as Rosh Hashanah. Other than Yom Kippur, many Jews also fast four other days in the year. These days are in memory of various sad days that have afflicted the Jewish nation during their years of captivity.

# Hinduism

In Hinduism, fasting is to deny oneself the physical needs of the body in order to gain spirituality. According to Hindu scriptures, fasting helps the body and soul attain a harmonious relationship. This in turn helps a person to abstain from worldly indulgences and to practice restraint, which helps one to achieve a focused mind and allows for spiritual attainment.

In Hinduism, fasting is prescribed on all Ekadasi days. Ekadasi is a Sanskrit word that refers to the 11th day of the lunar fortnight. As such, Ekadasi days occur twice a month. These days, all people from the ages of 8 to 80 should fast, irrespective of their caste or gender. It lasts for 24 hours. They should observe a complete day of fasting.

Those who cannot do so can observe a partial day of fasting by eating once at midday or in the evening.

Observant people stay away from beans and grains.

# Christianity – Lent

According to the Gospel of Matthew 6:16, Jesus instructed his disciples to fast sincerely. “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.” It seems likely that this fasting was similar to that of the Jews, with the ease of some restrictions, such as the use of ointments as seen above.

However, today Christians fast through the avoidance of certain food items or a meal as opposed to complete abstinence from all food and drink. This fasting today is called Lent. Lent is observed by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and some other Christians.

It is a forty-day period of fasting that is meant to emulate Jesus’ fast in the wilderness of Judea.

It usually begins 40 days before Easter and its exact date will differ depending on the denomination.



The main component of fasting during Lent is abstinence.

For some this refers to meat, for others it can be restricting oneself to only one meal a day.

Some also abstain from certain foods such as eggs and dairy products, or sugars and sweets.

Traditionally, Christians would also abstain from sexual intercourse during Lent, but this has now become more of a voluntary option.

# Veganism / Vegetarianism and Intermittent Fasting

Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms, it denotes the practice of staying away from all products derived wholly or partly from animals.

Vegetarianism is the practice of abstaining from the consumption of meat (red meat, poultry, seafood, insects, and the flesh of any other animal). It may also include abstaining from eating all by-products of animal slaughter.



Intermittent fasting focuses on when a person eats. The best way to explain it is that it is fasting, or going without eating for a specified number of hours, allowing the body to burn body fat easier, before breaking the fast by eating a meal. The 16:8 option is the most common fasting option individuals choose. For this option, a person eats during an 8-hour window of the day and fasts for a period of 16 consecutive hours.

However, for beginners, they can start with fasting 12 hours a day, and work towards a 16-hour fast.





# Fasting in Islam

In Islam, Muslims fast to come closer to God and to fulfil one of the main pillars of the religion. They sacrifice some of their lawful needs and desires for the sake of God, as a sign of submission and obedience to God. Fasting teaches Muslims to be mindful of God and remember that God is all-aware of what they do. It would be easy for a person to hide from people and eat and drink, then pretend to be fasting. However, Muslims don't do this, knowing that Allah sees and hears all.

The fast for Muslims is a dry fast – meaning one cannot drink water for the time period that a person is fasting. This is different from the intermittent fasting many people partake in for health purposes.

Fasting helps a person to train themselves to refrain from all sins and disobedience to God. Islam emphasizes not only physical abstinence in the form of food, drink, and sexual relations, but also spiritual abstinence from bad characteristics. This is why controlling temper and anger, refraining from lying, backbiting, and false oaths are all part of the fast for the Muslim.

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