

After the obligatory prayer, fasting is the most important ritual obligation of the Muslim; it one of the five pillars of Islam. Leaving aside the complex regulations deduced by the Islamic clergy, fasting in Islam consists of deliberately abstaining from all food, drink and sexual relations from the time of the first light before dawn until the last light after sunset. The principal fast occupies the entire month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year. This fast is binding on all Muslims past the age of puberty, with the exception of those who are travelling or unable to fast for reasons of health, such as sickness, pregnancy, old age or the like. Those who do not fast are obliged to compensate, preferably by fasting on another occasion or else by feeding the poor. Those who deliberately fail to fast or deliberately break the fast must compensate by fasting for two months or feeding sixty poor people. Because the Muslim year is eleven days shorter than the solar year, the fast of Ramadan can occur during any season of the year. The beginning of the month following Ramadan is celebrated as the `Idu'l-Fitr, the holiday of fast-breaking, and is one of the great holy days of the Islamic year. It is observed with feasts and celebrations lasting several days. Fasting is also encouraged at other times of the year, particularly the two months preceding Ramadan, on certain days of the week and month, and on certain anniversaries. Fasting is also prescribed in the Qur'an as expiation for offences ranging from manslaughter to the breaking of an oath. The rules for such fasts are the same as those for the fast of Ramadan. The Qur'an specifically identifies fasting as an obligation that had been imposed in earlier religions. Muslims generally consider the purpose of fasting to be the purification and humbling of the human soul.

The Babi and Bahá'í fast

The Bahá'í fast is established in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*¹ and occupies much the same preeminent position that it does in Islam. Several passages in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh lay stress on its importance, listing it with the obligatory prayer as among the greatest of the ritual obligations. According to Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Bahá'í fast is adapted from the fast ordained in the *Bayan*. The Bab's fast, mentioned in both the Arabic and Persian *Bayans*, occupied the last month of the Babi calendar, the month of `Ala', roughly 2-20 March. Believers were to fast from the age of eleven (numerically equivalent to *huva*, `He') until forty-two (*bala*, `Yea'). Children could fast until noon for the first eleven days. Those over forty-two were exempted from fasting. Those fasting had to abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset -- preferably from slightly before sunrise until slightly after sunset. No exemptions are mentioned. The real meaning of the fast, the Bab said, was abstention from the love of other than the Manifestation of God. The continuation of the fast was contingent on the acceptance of Him Whom God shall make manifest.²

Although Bahá'u'lláh accepted the fast of the Bab, He altered the details of its regulations in many important respects. The Bahá'í

fast is binding on all believers from the age of maturity, which for Bahá'ís is fifteen, until seventy. There is no provision made for children fasting. The following individuals are exempted from fasting: Travellers, providing their journey is to last at least nine hours or two hours on foot. If they break their journey for more than nineteen days, they are only exempt for the first three days after their arrival. If they return home, they must begin fasting on arrival. The sick. Women who are pregnant or nursing. Women who menstruating, who must instead repeat the phrase 'Glorified be God, the Lord of Splendour and Beauty' ninety-five times between one noon and the next.³ Those engaged in heavy labour, who are advised to be discrete and restrained in availing themselves of this exemption. These groups are also exempted from fasting in Islam. Bahá'u'lláh does not require missed days of fasting to be made up later, nor does He mention abstention from sexual relations. An individual who is exempt from fasting at any part of a day is exempt from fasting the entire day. Smoking, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, is called 'drinking smoke' in Arabic, and so smoking is banned while one is fasting.⁴

The fast is binding on Bahá'ís in all countries but it is an individual obligation, not enforceable by Bahá'í administrative institutions. The secondary regulations of fasting, such as the prohibition on smoking, are at present only binding on Bahá'ís of Middle Eastern background.⁵ Bahá'ís are allowed to fast at other times of the year but as this is not encouraged, it is rarely done. Bahá'u'lláh permitted the making of vows to fast but preferred that such vows be 'directed to such objectives as will profit mankind'.⁶ While in Edirne Bahá'u'lláh revealed a number of prayers for fasting (munajat or alvah-i-siyam), although one of them contains a reference to 'Akka. These prayers, some rather lengthy, are the most important statements on the spiritual meaning of the fast in the Bahá'í scripture: for example, ' . . . Thou hast bidden all men to observe the fast, that through it they may purify their souls and rid themselves of all attachment to any one but Thee . . .'⁷ Fasting itself is only acceptable if it is done purely out of love for God.

Notes

1 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, para. 10.

2 The Bab, Arabic Bayan 8:18; Persian Bayan 8:18.

3 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, para. 13.

4 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, n. 32.

6 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, question 71.

7 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 79.

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