

Ramadan and Lent: Time for Fasting

Western writers sometimes refer to Ramadan as “the Muslim Lent.” There are superficial similarities, significant differences and deep resemblances between Ramadan and Lent.

Fasting is the hallmark of Ramadan. The Qur’an says Muslims should fast during the month of Ramadan because that is when the Qur’an was revealed (2:185). Fasting is obligatory for every Muslim, with certain exceptions (2:183-185). The Qur’an and Muslim law offer specific instructions on how and when the fast is to be practiced. For example: “eat and drink until you can tell a white thread from a black one in the light of the coming dawn. Then resume the fast until nightfall” (2:187).

Many Christians fast during Lent, although fasting is not a universal Christian practice. The Bible gives no specific instructions on a season that Christians are required to fast. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness (Mt 4:2), and Jesus’ disciples are criticized for not fasting (Mk 2:18-20).

Christian denominations have various traditions regarding fasting. For example, the Catholic Church in the United States instructs: “Catholics in the United States are obliged to abstain from the eating of meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays during the season of Lent.”

All Muslims throughout the world observe Ramadan, regardless of their sect, school or nationality. Christian observance of Lent varies greatly among Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants. Some Christians, including many Baptists, do not observe Lent at all.

Ramadan focuses on self-discipline, devotion to God and generosity toward the needy. During Ramadan, Muslims cultivate complete obedience to God, a sensitivity to God’s sustenance and empathy for those who are poor and hungry. Lent focuses on penitence and preparation for Easter. The climax of Lent is Holy Week, which commemorates the last week of Jesus’ life, including the Last Supper

and the Crucifixion. The model of Jesus as suffering servant is held up for Christians to follow (Phil 2:5-11).

Both Ramadan and Lent end in a joyous festival. Ramadan concludes with the Festival of Fast Breaking, Eid ul-Fitr. Muslims offer special prayers to God and alms to the poor. Three days of festivities follow. Lent ends with Easter, the festival of the Resurrection, which celebrates new life in Christ.

Sincere faith is crucial for both Ramadan and Lent. The intentions of the Muslim determines the validity of the Ramadan fast (2:184). Jesus teaches that true fasting is of the heart, not merely of outward action (Mt 6:16-18). Pope John Paul II wrote about Lent: "The main current of Lent must flow through the interior man, through hearts and consciences."

More worship participation and personal acts of piety mark both Ramadan and Lent.

Despite their similarities, Ramadan and Lent operate in very different theological frameworks. But there is still deep resemblance between them.

Both Muslims and Christians connect increased devotion to God with religious acts of purity and self-sacrificial service. Fasting is placed in a larger context of God's gracious provision. For both, true worship is a matter of faithful and joyful commitment to God, not mere conformity to religious rules.

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