

## Prayer and Fasting in Judaism and Islam

Mukhtiar A. Kandhro\*

### ABSTRACT

*Abrahamic religions including Judaism and Islam have many similarities in their belief as well as ritual system. Based on these similarities, the some Orientalists claim that Islam is plagiarised religion from the preceding religion, i.e. Judaism. This paper compares two rituals of Judaism and Islam i.e. prayer and fasting. Based on this extensive comparison, this paper argues that the issue of similarities rather proves the originality of Islam and the continuity of the revelation that brought down from Allah.*

**Keywords:** Prayer, Fasting, Judaism, Islam.

### INTRODUCTION:

The analytical comparison of rituals of prayer and fasting between Judaism and Islam seems necessary to assess the concept of the originality of Islam, for mainly two reasons: firstly, the Western writers claim that Islam or the Prophet of Islam has borrowed most of the teachings, particularly rituals, from Judaism and Christianity. As a result, they look into the teachings of Islam through this framework of mind. Muslims reject the concept of borrowing from Judaism and Christianity, rather they believe in the unity of the source through which these teachings are revealed to different prophets. Secondly, this comparison depends upon the understanding of the concept about the originality of Islam.

There are two views- as mentioned above- with regard to the originality of Islam as follows:

First: the view of Muslims- regardless of sectarian differences- according to which Islam is not a new religion in the sense that it is basically and completely different religion from the other monotheistic religions; rather it is the continuity of God's message to mankind, which was previously revealed to other prophets before the Prophet of Islam. This view is supported by numerous verses of the Quran. It seems appropriate to quote a few of them to ponder this view.

Verses from the Quran:

1. Al-Baqarah: 1:97
2. Aal Imran: 3:3
3. Al-Saff: 61:6
4. Al-Ahqaf: 46:9

This view is further supported by the statements of the Quran about Jesus (AS) as a continuation of the message of previous prophets, which is mentioned in the following verses:

---

\* Dr., Lecturer, Department of Islamic Culture, University of Sind, Jamshoro  
Email: hafizmukhtiar@gmail.com Date of Receipt: 24-6-2015

1. Al-Maidah: 5:48
2. Fatir: 35:31
3. Al-Ahqaf: 46:30

According to the view held by the Muslims, it is understood, firstly, that Islam is quite similar to other two monotheistic or Abrahamic religions- considering Abraham forefather of all monotheistic faiths- in the sense that they agree upon the fundamental beliefs, which are the Unity of God, Prophecy, Day of recompense, belief in angles with slightly difference in details. Secondly, it is believed that all the prophets are being sent with the guidance for mankind in their times, as the message of all of them was the same; they confirmed each other as mentioned in the following statement of Jesus (AS).

This view is also supported by the statements of the New Testament with regard to the message of Jesus Christ as the continuation of previous message of the prophets of Israel such as:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill”. (Mathew: 5:17)

“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures”. (Luke: 24:27)

Non-Muslims who agree that Islam is not a completely new religion, they assume that its messenger borrowed and copied Islamic teachings from Jewish and Christian sources i.e. from scriptures or through meetings with Jewish and Christian scholarly people. This could be seen, in the case of Christians, in the title of Bell's book, “The origin of Islam in its Christian Environment” and in the case of Jews, in the title of Gerald Hawting's book, “The Development of Islamic Rituals”.

This later view may not be accepted for mainly two reasons:

Firstly, it is based on superficial analysis of the teachings of religion keeping in mind the outlook and some minor similarities to make a big claim of plagiarising from previous religions.

Secondly, there is a lack of deep understanding of origins and sources of a religion keeping in mind that same origin may cause the similarities in some aspects not in all.

Thirdly, this view may be one of the major hurdles and difficulties in inter-faith relations and better understanding of each other.

From the teachings of Old Testament and the Qur'an, it is evinced that God has given the complete code of worship to the people of that era which was practically showed to them by the Prophets. Judaism and Islam have many things in common such as Unity of God, rejection of Trinity and prohibition of meat slaughtered by pagans. Likewise, there is also similarity between the two

religions in prayer and fasting though many differences in details are there. This is mainly because the basic and original source of the two monotheistic religions is the same. This is why they have much more in common as compared to polytheistic religions. According to this approach, it is the matter of unity of the original source not the matter of borrowing or plagiarism.

This is what we see that Qur'an and the Prophet have accepted many Jewish and Christian traditions and even Arab traditions, deemed to be Abrahamic, or adopted after a slight change or amendment as seen in the rituals of Fasting and Hajj.

### **PRAYER**

In Islam and Judaism, adherence to God's commandments is expressed by required and obligated religious rituals, which are regularly repeated at different times. In Islamic tradition, the term for rituals or worship is "*ibadat*" which could simply be translated as 'acts of service' that is acts of obedience that Muslims owe to their Lord. In the following lines, it has been attempted to give a brief description of similarities and differences in Prayer and Fasting in two religions.

1. In the beginning there were two times of prayer both in Judaism and Islam as the Old Testament mentions morning and evening prayer<sup>1</sup>. Later on, Judaism developed three prayers a day on the pattern of Islam<sup>2</sup>, as is seen in the Talmud of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

Though some scholars have attempted to prove five times of prescribed prayers from the text of the Quran- as can be seen in the commentaries of the Quran- however, the Quran does not explicitly mention the five prayers, it gives a variety of prayer times.<sup>4</sup> The Prophet Muhammad (May God's peace and blessings upon him) practically demonstrated what it means and how to act upon them which are clearly mentioned in the Ahadiths as five times. Presently, both religions are different in the details of timings of these prayers.

2. The minor ritual ablution (*wudu*) is used to get rid of "minor" ritual impurity (*hadath*) in both religions. It is stated in the Quran: "You, who believe, when you prepare for the prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows and rub your heads and your feet up to the ankles"<sup>5</sup>, whereas, The Old Testament Tabernacle had a basin for washing the hands and feet of the priests before they entered the presence of the Lord<sup>6</sup>, and others too were to consecrate themselves when coming into His presence.<sup>7</sup> Muslims do the same order in their ablutions as the Jews do—the face, then the hands, then the feet. Each part is washed three times.

Another parallel is rubbing the hands and face with sand (*tayammum*) if water cannot be found, which is permitted by both the Quran<sup>8</sup> and the Talmud.<sup>9</sup>

3. Direction: The Jews prayed towards Jerusalem<sup>10</sup>, a practice regulated in the Talmud. Muslims for a time prayed toward Jerusalem (16 or 17 months according

to al-Bukhari).<sup>11</sup> In noting the prescribed direction of prayer, the Quran- in certain cases like a person who does not or cannot know the direction of Qibla- (Q. 2:115/109), like the Talmud, recognized that God was everywhere. The Quran, however, notes that the direction of the Qibla towards Makkah is a test case for true believers and unbelievers. Those who are true believers follow the commandment of God, who has commanded to turn the faces from Jerusalem to Makkah.

4. Praying Postures: There are certain similarities between Muslim postures of prayers and those of Jews and Christians. First there is the posture of standing (*qiyam*; Q. 22:26/27). In the Old and New Testaments, worshippers stood to pray (1 Kings. 8:14,22; Nehemiah. 9:2; Mark. 11:25). The Jewish *tefilla* prayers were called *'amida* (standing), indicating the posture when they were performed. The second posture is bowing (*ruku*; Q. 22:26/27. 77/76), which is the equivalent of the Jewish *keri'a* and communicates the sense of humble servitude that the genuflection does in the Roman Catholic mass.

The third posture is prostration with the forehead on the ground (*sujud*, Q. 22:26/27. 77/76). Again this form is found in both the Old and New Testaments (Genesis. 22:5; Numbers. 16:22; 1 Samuels. 24:9; Nehemiah. 8:6; Mathew. 26:39). The *sujud* is the equivalent of the Jewish *hishtahawaya* and a similar Eastern Christian form. The fourth posture is half kneeling and half sitting (*julus*). Kneeling is also found in a Biblical tradition (2 Chr. 6:13; 1 Kings. 8:54; Psalms. 95:6; Acts 20:36; 21:5). Sometimes the hands are lifted up as in Biblical times (Psalms. 28:2; 134:2; 1 Tim. 2:8).

## FASTING

Like Prayer there are also certain similarities and differences in Fasting ritual in two religions such as:

1. Expiatory nature: According to Hudhayfa (RA), the Prophet (SAWS) said: “The man who lets himself be led into sin for the sake of his family, his fortune and his neighbour, can expiate his fault by three different means: prayer, fasting and charity”.<sup>12</sup> These words bear a striking resemblance to a rabbinical phrase, attested in Genesis and elsewhere and which has a long history in the Jewish liturgy of the New Year and Yum Kippur: “Three things annul divine judgment: prayer, charity and penance”.<sup>13</sup>

The Qur'an and the fast, one reads elsewhere, intercede on behalf of the believer and God recognizes their intercession.<sup>14</sup> A widely diffused hadith of Abu Hurayra (RA) instructs that at the beginning of the month of Ramadan, heaven opens up, hell is closed.<sup>15</sup> The opening of the gates of heaven or of mercy is a well-known motif in Jewish liturgy, resting principally on the parallelism between the earthly sanctuary and the celestial one.<sup>16</sup> The belief in the suspension of the punishments of hell is also found in Judaism, but in relation to the Sabbath.<sup>17</sup>

After the fixing of the Jewish calendar in the fourth century, direct observation of the moon and the calculations based on such observations were abolished. Among Muslims, the principle of observations remained in force. A much-cited hadith appears to contrast Muslim computation to other methods of calculation. Ibn Umar (RA) transmits (*ummah ummiyyah*), we neither write nor calculate. The month is like that and like that and like that (showing his ten fingers three times, one thumb bent on the third occasion)<sup>18</sup>.

There is lack of agreement between Judaism and Islam over different kinds of fasting, as appears frequently in the hadith. The Qur'an (2:187) permits eating and drinking through the night up to the time when, at dawn, one can distinguish a white thread from a black one. This disposition is related to the rabbinical rule (Mishna Berakot 1:2), according to which one can recite the morning *shema* from the moment, when one can distinguish blue from white. But Muslim tradition is nearly unanimous in rejecting this interpretation, relating the verse to the distinction between the blackness of night and the whiteness of daytime.<sup>19</sup> On breaking the fast, there is also lack of agreement between Muslims and the "People of the Book". The hadith recommend that it be broken as quickly as possible after sunset, according to the saying of the Prophet (SAWS): "People will enjoy well-being in the measure that they expedite breaking the fast".<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere<sup>22</sup>, one reads, on the authority of Abu Hurayra (RA): "The religion will not cease to be victorious so long as people expedite breaking the fast, because the Jews and Christians delay it".<sup>22</sup> Nowadays, the breaking of the fast ends all the prohibitions that weigh on the Muslim during the day. But, that was not so at the beginning of Islam. The prohibition against eating after having slept is clearly set forth in the Babylonian Talmud, Taanith 12a.

It is also recorded that the fast of the tenth of Muharram, called *Ashura*, is practiced by Jews of Medina at the time of migration of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS). The fast of *Ashura* was observed by the Quraysh during the *jahiliyyah* (pagan Arab period). Once Ramadan was instituted, *Ashura* became optional. Once he arrived in Medina, the Prophet (SAWS) saw that the Jews fasted on the day of *Ashura*. When asked about the reason for the fast, they replied: "It is the day on which God gave victory over Pharaoh to Moses and the children of Israel". Muhammad replied to them: "We have a greater right to Moses than have you" and he forbade fasting on that day.<sup>23</sup> *Ashura* was a venerated day among the Jews, a holiday. The Prophet (SAWS) said: "You must fast on this day".<sup>24</sup>

Jewish law forbids fasting on Saturdays and on holidays. The same prohibition applies in Islam to the two great holidays: the end of Ramadan (*fitr*) and the feast of the sacrifices.

Other practices are also similar to Judaism. Abstaining from eating and drinking in the day but not at night was Jewish. Even in biblical times, this was sometimes practiced (Judges. 20:26; 2 Samuels. 1:12;3:35). Likewise, the Quran says, "Eat

and drink until the white thread becomes distinct to you from the black thread at dawn” (Q. 2:187/183).

Fasting has played a significant role in Judaism and Christianity— including those of extended periods like the month of Ramadan. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus (AS) all fasted 40 days and nights (Deuteronomy. 9:9, 18; 1 Kings. 19:8; Luke.

4:1-2). Jesus expected people to fast (Mathew. 6:16-18), and Paul fasted frequently (Acts 13:2; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27).

## CONCLUSION

Although Prayer and Fasting in Judaism and Islam have few similarities, however, there are some differences as well. Islam never claims anywhere that it is a new religion, rather it proclaims that it is the continuity of the same revelation that brought down to Prophet Abraham (AS) and rest of the prophets. The issue of similarities between these religions proves this fact very clearly.

## REFERENCES

1. The Holy Bible, King James Version, Exodus: 29:39; Numbers: 28:4
2. Psalms: 55:17 cf. Daniel: 6:11
3. The Talmud of Babylonia, trans. Jacob Neusner, I Berakthoth: 4: 1, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984
4. See, for example, suras: 2:238-239; 17:78-80; 20:130; 24:58-57
5. See Surahs: 5:6-8; cf. 4:43-46
6. Exodus: 30:17-21; 40:30-32
7. 1 Samuel: 16:5
8. Suras 4:43/46 and 5:6/9-9
9. The Talmud of Babylonia, I: Tractate Berakhot, chap. 2, sec. 22, 116; A. J. Wensinck, “Tayammum,” Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, 589A
10. 1 Kings: 8:33; Daniel: 6:10
11. Bukhari, M. I. (1862-1908). Al-Jami al-sahih, ed. Ludolf Krehl and Th. W. Juynboll Leiden, vol. IV, Bk. 60, chap. 20
12. Ibid, vol. I, Bk. 473, chap. 3
13. Theodor, J. (1903-29) ed. Berisshit rabba, , ch.XLIV, Berlin, p. 434
14. Hanbal, A. (1311 AH). Musnad , vol. II, Cairo, p. 174
15. Ibid, p. 230; Bukhari, vol. I, Bk. 474, chap.5; Hajjaj, M. (1329-33). Sahih Muslim, vol. III, Cairo, p. 121; Tirmidhi, M. I. (1292 AH), Al-Jamia al-sahih, vol. I, Bulaq, p. 132; Ibn-e-Maja, M. Y. (1280 AH). Sunan, vol. I, Cairo, p.232; Nasai, A. S. Sunan, vol. I, pp. 298-300
16. Babylonian Talmud, Erub. 19a
17. This belief is also found in hadith, applied naturally to Friday, cf. Ghazali, M. Ihya ulum al-din, vol. iii, chap. 5, sec.1
18. Muslim, vol. III, p. 124; Qastallani, A. M. (1323 AH). Irshad al-Sari, al-Matb'ah al-Kubra al-Amiriyyah, vol. III, Misr, p. 357 and the corresponding chapters in other collections.
19. Bukhari, vol. I, Bk. 477, chap. 16; Muslim, vol. III, p.128; Sijistani, A. S. (1997). Sunan, vol. I, Beirut: Dar ibn Hazm, p. 235; Tirmidhi, vol. II, p. 61; Tabari, M. J. (1323-29 AH). Jami al-bayan fi tafsir ay al Quran, vol. II, Cairo, pp. 96-101
20. Qastallani, vol. III, p. 393
21. Sijistani, A. S. vol. I, p. 235; Hanbal, A. vol. II, p. 39; Ibn-e- Maja, vol. I, p. 267
22. Bukhari, vol. III, Bk. 51-52, chap. 52, Sijistani, A.S. Sunan, vol. I, p243
23. Bukhari, vol. III, p. 51, chap. 52