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Are We Achieving or Missing the Objectives of Fasting?

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As yet another blessed month of Ramadan unfolds, the perennial, and somewhat disturbing, truth re-emerges. That truth is that a great many Muslims fast. In many countries, overwhelming majorities – perhaps all -- do so.

In some countries, it is an anomaly to see or discover that any Muslim, from any societal stratum, does not fast, even for legitimate reasons. Heavy penalties are imposed on those who openly violates the sanctity of Ramadan and fasting.

It is illegal in most Muslim counties to drink or eat in public during Ramadan. A person -- sometimes even a non-Muslim -- can be sent to jail, heavily fined, or may yet be beaten by vigilantes.

However, the overall situation of Muslims as the best and standard-setting ummah (community), and the supposed history and civilization makers, does not improve. Yet, one gets a feeling that it is getting worse by the day, despite the apparent prevalent

faithfulness and virtue which, by the letter and spirit of revelation, guarantees prosperity and happiness.

At the collective level, Muslims are losing respect in the eyes of most of the world, so much so that it seems that there is hardly anyone who genuinely respects them, or takes them seriously. It is as if Muslims do not do enough with reference to the proposition of changing what is in themselves and their hearts, so that Almighty Allah could take care of and change their condition as a community.

Why is it so when the primary objective of Ramadan and fasting is the increase in piety, God-fearing and God-consciousness (taqwa), intended to inspire a person to be on guard against wrong and immoral actions and keen to do things that please Almighty Allah alone?

Why is it so when fasting, as a revolutionary experience, is designed to make us better and more enlightened people, closer to Allah and each other?

Why is it so, furthermore, when fasting and everything that goes with it, such as collective prayers, sharing meals, brotherhood, universal kindness and benevolence, as well as outpouring philanthropy, are as much personal experiences as co-operative engagements and missions?

Finally, why is it so when fasting is a means to boost Muslim civilizational consciousness and output? In passing, some of the most ground-breaking events in the history of Islamic civilization took place during none other than the month of Ramadan. Fasting then was not perceived as an impediment, nor as a source of concern, or deterrence. Rather, it was recognized as an incentive, as well as a source of motivation and zeal.

The answer to these questions will be three-pronged, or tripartite, dwelling firstly on the purpose of fasting, secondly on the relationship between fasting and culture, and thirdly on the relationship between Islam, as well as fasting, and life.

The Purpose of Fasting

Almighty Allah says in the Qur'an: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may become righteous (pious)" ([al-Baqarah, 183](#)).

The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Whoever fasts during Ramadan out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Also: "Fasting is a shield with which a servant protects himself from the Fire" (Musnad Ahmad).

Accordingly, a fasting person is expected to markedly enhance his spiritual state, making him ever conscious of Allah's presence and His infinite Knowledge. That, in turn, should motivate him to constantly perform righteous deeds and shun all sorts of forbidden activities: physical, mental and spiritual.

A person is to emerge from Ramadan and its demanding fasting process as showered with divine mercy, lavished in heavenly love and gifted with grace and endless blessings. He is to emerge as forgiven and almost assured of Jannah (Paradise).

He is furthermore to come out as a winner against all evil temptations and whispers within and without his self. He is to become kinder, more generous, more productive and generally more useful to his surroundings that include both Muslims and non-Muslims.

If not, a person who fasts is set to become a big loser, as proclaimed by the Prophet (pbuh) on numerous occasions, for the purpose and goal of fasting revolve around each and every component mentioned above.

In short, the life of a fasting person, in the end, is not to be the same again. Every single day of the month of Ramadan -- and every Ramadan as a holy month as well -- ought to signify a person's upward spiritual movement and progression towards his ultimate spiritual fulfilment. Every Ramadan is to set a new benchmark. Surely, that the first third of Ramadan is mercy (rahmah), the second forgiveness (maghfirah), and the third salvation or ransom from the Fire ('itq min al-nar) -- as revealed by the Prophet (pbuh) in a da'if or weak hadith -- clearly indicates the fasting person's gradual spiritual growth, and its foremost stations, throughout the month of Ramadan.

Fasting also tames one's ego and extinguishes his negativities and failings. It dramatically improves his attitude, worldview and character.

If such is not the case, however, the validity and correctness of one's fasting may be in serious doubt. It may not be accepted by Allah, and thus, all the renowned and abundant benefits and boons associated with fasting may eventually evade a person, partly or completely.

The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Whoever does not give up false speech and evil actions, Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink (i.e., Allah will not accept his fasting)" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

The Prophet (pbuh) suggested in many a hadith (tradition) that the one who is truly deprived is the one who is deprived of the goodness of Ramadan and the obligation of fasting, and the one who is truly a loser is the one who has not been forgiven by the end of Ramadan.

The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, for example: "May his nose be rubbed in the dust, a man for whom Ramadan comes and then goes before he is forgiven" (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

Fasting and Culture

In light of the above-mentioned and greatly troubling phenomenon, good and bad persons -- male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated -- fast among today's Muslims. Corrupt and oppressive leaders, as well as politicians, fast; as do the greedy and materialistic businessmen and businesswomen, puffed up and misleading artists, haughty and ensnaring media personnel, fantasizing and dreaming students and

scholars, and numerous backers and tub-thumpers for all of the above from among the ranks of the ordinary folks.

The situation is such that the same leaders, politicians, artists, media personnel and businesspersons try their best to hijack the spirit and dominate the limelight of Ramadan and its subsequent Eid celebrations for their own personal agendas, regrettably often succeeding in their endeavors.

This is so because to many, the realm of fasting is associated with sheer culture. Yet, it is sometimes deemed a cultural dimension by itself, with extremely little religious and spiritual disposition imbued in it.

Thus, pompous festivities, exhibitions of power, influence and wealth, extravagant meals, latest trends in fashion and lifestyle, consumerism, publicity stunts especially by politicians and the rich, have all become inexorably bracketed with Ramadan, fasting and Eid celebrations. To certain categories of people, there is no more entertainment, fun and enjoyment than during Ramadan and its immediate aftermath. In addition, myriads of movies, TV shows, drama series and songs are produced in various languages in order to cater to the growing global demand.

What we are witnessing, its stands to reason, is the emergence of what could be dubbed a Muslim pop culture with its extending aspirations and goals. It is transmitted and sustained via mass media – just like everything else today, but most of all that which is not entirely wholesome and appropriate – reflecting the cultural activities and commercial tendencies as well as products that are suited to, or aimed at, the tastes of the general masses of Muslims many segments of which are incessantly aimed to be brainwashed and manipulated. Since this Muslim pop culture enjoys endless possibilities and potential, even non-Muslims are increasingly partaking in its promotion, articulation and enrichment.

As a consequence of the latest developments, some of the purely spiritual activities were not spared either.

For example, many mosques are virtually competing among themselves who will hire better and more popular preachers and Qur'an reciters, some of whom have become Muslim either local or global celebrities on account of what and how they do. They are often brought from distant and more glamorous places, spending considerable amounts of financial resources for the purpose.

The Qur'an is thus recited beautifully all the time, though little consideration is being given to its profound heavenly messages and their implications for thought and everyday life. The same goes to dhikr (remembrance of Almighty Allah) sessions, supplications (du'a) and nashids as spiritual songs and chants.

In many essentially non-Arab milieus, lots of people do not even know what is being recited, pronounced, supplicated and sung, and honestly, a few would ever care so long as the reciters, performers and singers do their job "professionally" and impressively,

regularly shedding some tears as a tacit sign of piety and devotion, inducing in the process their audiences to follow suit.

Similarly, spiritual talks and lectures are often saturated – some more and others less -- with humor, fun, anecdotes, legends, weak or outright fabricated traditions (hadith) of the Prophet (pbuh), and attempts to directly or indirectly tarnish the name and image of a person, group, community, political party, or a religious faction, so as to warrant the full attention of the listeners and make the talks and lectures more interesting, attractive and so, more effective.

This way, many religious preachers appear as though skilled performers and entertainers, trying to make their profession as much up-to-date and profitable as possible. Just like everyone else, they likewise do whatever is necessary, not only to keep the job they have, but also advance their career prospects. They are textbook populists, within their intellectual and moral framing representing and looking after the interests of the “pure people”.

Furthermore, the last third of Ramadan, instead of being most spiritually charged and infused with most intensive spiritual pursuits, normally becomes lost in consumerism and glitz on account of the approaching excessive Eid celebrations. All of a sudden, while fasting as a cultural manifestation gathers momentum, it, as an intended extraordinary spiritual experience, becomes anticlimactic.

Gluttony never goes away either, due to the endless and often aggressive promotion of food as an important part of culture, needed for preserving Muslim cultural identities.

Consequently, food, money, time and energy are often irrationally wasted throughout for the aims and purposes that stand at the diametrically opposite point of much of what Ramadan and fasting epitomize. As much as we give in charity during entire Ramadan, could be wasted in a day or two on our excessive food and stuffs. As much as we care for others in Ramadan, in terms of spending for their sake our precious time, efforts and resources, could be easily matched by a few gluttonous, amusement, or consumerist weaknesses of ours, attended to in a few days of the fasting month.

Without doubt, our Ramadan is a month full of paradoxes and ironies. It is fraught with contentious attitudes and actions. The whole thing sometimes boils down to sheer numbers and statistics: how many pages or sections (juz') of the Qur'an have been read a day, how many units of voluntary or supererogatory prayers (rak'ah) have been performed each day and night, how many ringgits/dollars/euros we have to give away as obligatory and how much we should as voluntary charity, how many times we have invited people for iftar and how many times we were invited, etc.

Sometimes one seriously wonders how much spirituality has been injected into those in principle extremely meritorious deeds. One further wonders if we emphasize too much quantity at the expense of quality, and the form and appearances at the expense of the substance and soul. By the same token, do we live, or just practice, Ramadan and its fasting obligation? Do we tend to feel and experience, or just survive, it?

As hinted earlier, the *raison d'être* for this peculiar state of affairs is a belief that fasting is part of Muslim culture, rather than a fundamental and unreservedly Islamic principle and practice. In that case, fasting would be seen partly as a revealed tenet, and partly – especially a number of implementational aspects of fasting – as a cultivated behavior derived from the cumulative deposit of the beliefs, morals, practices, objects and lifestyle acquired by Muslims in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

The proponents of this idea feel relatively safe and free to operate, in that no culture is inherently superior or inferior to any other. This is so because a culture as a totality of learned, accumulated and then socially transmitted perceptions, practices and experiences evolves under the sway of a particular set of contextual components and factors, many of which are beyond human comprehension and influence.

A culture is a result of predominantly natural and spontaneous processes. Human open interferences in such processes are small and ancillary, playing second fiddle to the former. A culture, it goes without saying, cannot be inherently good or bad either. Whatever is evolved, accumulated and socially transmitted by a people has a merit and so, should be respected and preserved.

Nonetheless, Islam as a complete belief and value system, as well as a way of life, though respecting numerous elements of culture -- above all such as are consistent with the Islamic heavenly message -- inspired, initiated and guided the formation of new cultures. The fields of values, beliefs, epistemology, worldview and the fundamental aspects of the behavioral patterns that have thence originated, were affected most as they contained more universal and transcendent than local and physical character. At the same time, Islam recognizes and accommodates natural as well as innate auxiliary elements of local cultures and traditions, chiefly when they are legitimate and in line with the principal teachings and values of Islam, treating them as a source of minor rulings where there are no explicit primary texts of the Qur'an and sunnah specifying the ruling.

It is thus always said that Islam influences cultures, and not that cultures influence Islam, except in some relative and rather inconsequential instances. It is also asserted that while Islam and Muslims have common cultural elements, they are also very diverse.

Indeed, Islam is more than a culture, though it possesses and promotes distinctive culture characteristics of its own. Islam and Islamic civilization promote the notion of unity in diversity, that is, the unity of universal message, vision, mission, values and purpose, and the diversity of local and operational methods, expressions, forms and solutions.

Islam and Life

The Prophet (pbuh) said: "Islam is built on five (pillars): bearing witness that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, establishing prayer, paying zakah (a form of alms-giving), Hajj (pilgrimage) and fasting Ramadan" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

This hadith subtly presents the meaning of Islam and its relationship with life. We can understand that the pillars of Islam are one thing and its edifice another, the latter resting and depending on the former. They together form such a formidable unit that neither can exist without the other. No submission to, and worshipping of, Almighty Allah is possible on the basis of pillars and principles other than the five mentioned. In equal measure, the five pillars cannot generate, nor support, a behavioral pattern, or a life paradigm, other than Islam.

The hadith also reveals that the five pillars, central and ultimate as they are, denote just the pillars, or the foundation, of Islam. They alone are not exclusively Islam; nor do they thus constitute its whole and comprehensive nature. All-inclusive Islam, rather, is something more. The pillars are Islam only inasmuch as they function as its foundation and support. In a subtle conceptual and functional relationship, the two aspects form the comprehensive edifice of Islam as a philosophy, worldview, religion, law and civilization. The foundation is a means of the main structure of Islam, which is viewed as the end, and which accounts for the whole life involvement, contribution and experience.

That being said, in the context of Ramadan and fasting, as one of the five pillars of Islam, fasting Ramadan is not an end in itself. It is a means whereby a higher set of goals and experiences are pursued and achieved: "...so that you may become righteous (pious, God-fearing or God-conscious) (la'allakum tattaqun)" ([al-Baqarah, 183](#)).

It does not mean that a fasting person by means of merely abstaining from eating food, drinking liquids, smoking cigarettes, and engaging in any sexual activity, from dawn to sunset, will automatically procure all the benefits of fasting. That will all depend on what happens during fasting and afterwards in other existential spheres, which rest on fasting as one of the five pillars of Islam.

Fasting will be rewarded proportionately with its effects on a person's behavior and overall productivity in those spheres. Such is the meaning of taqwa as the ultimate objective of fasting. Also, such is the meaning of Islam as total submission to Almighty Allah, and the meaning of living life solely according to His Will and Decrees, which is called 'ibadah (worship). Indeed, Islam is life, and life, as perceived and created by Allah the Creator and Master, in essence, is Islam.

It is thus grossly inappropriate if a fasting person's tongue is not guarded against idle chatter, lying, gossiping, obscenity, rudeness, arguing and controversy; and his ears against everything reprehensible, for everything unlawful to utter is likewise unlawful to listen to; and his limbs and organs against all categories of sin. Imam al-Ghazzali reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said that "five things break a man's fasting: lying, backbiting, gossiping, perjury and a lustful gaze".

This means that it is not right that a person's stomach fasts, but his talk, thoughts and some other vital organs and limbs do not. Nor is it right that a person's physical part fasts, but his psychological and spiritual ones do not. Nor is it right, furthermore, that a person is good and pious during Ramadan, but adopts another contradictory both attitude and lifestyle after it. Finally, nor is it right that a person is devout and God-fearing

in pure religious matters and when dealing with pure religious institutions – whether during Ramadan or beyond it -- but adopts another incongruous demeanour when dealing in other worldly matters and with other non-religious institutions.

This obvious inconsistency, containing unambiguous elements of hypocrisy, is unacceptable a course of action in Islam. It is an incomplete, yet outright wrong, Islam. It sends out all the wrong signals as much to fellow Muslims as to non-Muslims. It is set to confuse and mislead, rather than enlighten and guide. No misconception about Islam will ever be thus removed, and no bad image about Muslims corrected. On the contrary, not only will the same be further enhanced, but also new falsehoods and misjudgments will be created and caused to thrive.

Fasting, it follows, is to inspire -- together with the other pillars of Islam -- a new comprehensive life approach, whose ethos will be distinguished by the Islamic precepts of unity, comprehensiveness, universality and all-inclusive excellence. Moreover, fasting is to help in the expansion of Islamic normative teachings and values from the realm of the personal life to the realm of institutions and social engagement and participation.

Every successful civilizational project starts with individuals, but quickly morphs into, and is only sustained by, institutions. Needless to recall, for example, that the “humanity project” started with Prophet Adam, and the last and most consequential prophethood mission “project” started with Muhammad (pbuh) and in a cave called Hira’. Having received his prophethood calling, Muhammad (pbuh) for obvious reasons never returned to the cave.

To some researchers, this discrepancy between the personal and social institutional engagements and interests is one of the main reasons for Muslim religious, cultural and civilizational decadence. It is therefore high time that Muslims understand that Allah is the God, not only of Ramadan, but also every other month. He is the God both of the powerful and weak, of the rich and poor, of the educated and those uneducated, of the leaders and their subjects, and of the oppressors and those oppressed. Likewise, He is the God, not only in mosques and other places of worship, but also everywhere else, such as in offices, factories, banks and other financial institutions, parliaments, schools, shopping centers, entertainment centers, houses, parks, on the streets, etc.

The whole earth has been rendered a mosque and a place of prostration (sujud), and the whole life a ceaseless system of worship (‘ibadah) and submission. Fasting is only a segment, or a support -- albeit one of the most critical ones -- in the entire metaphysical scheme of things.