

eternal life through trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection.

4) **God Ransoms His People: the Passover** (Ex. 11 & 12). The central importance of the Passover needs to be seen by Muslims. The Qur'an is silent about the sacrifice to redeem the first born from death. It is hard to imagine the Jewish tribes in Mohamed's time neglecting to share about the Passover, when they shared so many stories from the Old Testament. But pointing up the passover sacrifice would have accentuated the "chosen" nature of Israel. The Qur'an prefers to play up Abraham's sheep sacrifice and to locate it in Mecca. There is a deliberate playing down of the "election" of Israel in the Qur'an in favour of a new tradition of the continuity of Mohamed, the Arabs, and God's acts in history, especially through Abraham. The sacrifice that reportedly took place at Mecca is far more important than the one that took place in Egypt.

The discovery that God ransomed His people through the Passover sacrifice, however, leads a Muslim to understand the saying of Jesus, "I have come to give my life as a ransom for many" (e.g. Mark 10:45). This is a crucial statement of Jesus' self-understanding of his mission to act as a sacrifice for his people, those committed to him. It is here that a Muslim can understand the necessity for the death of Jesus on the cross. If the Passover sacrifice was essential to redeem the sons of Israel from slavery in Egypt, then a sacrifice like it is necessary to redeem the sons of Adam.

We can point a Muslim to the Lord's supper where Jesus turned the Passover into a remembrance of him. Some of my friends have understood "this is my body" and "this is my blood" when they have taken in the meaning of the Passover. The title "Jesus is the lamb of God" also makes sense in the passover context. This study then leads to a look at the sermons in Acts, and to the Pauline epistles, Hebrews and 1 Peter, where the theme of sacrificial redemption is further expounded.

(Qur'an quotations are from The Koran interpreted, trans. A.J. Arberry, Oxford 1964. Numbers following the "/" give the versification of the standard Egyptian edition of the Qur'an).

**A GREAT MISSIOLOGICAL ERROR OF OUR TIME:
KEEPING THE FAST OF RAMADAN--WHY WE SHOULDN'T**

by Donald R. Rickards

It has become increasingly popular for missionaries who are geared to the times to keep the fast of Ramadan. Living as we do in a day when Anthropology seems to govern Theology, some messengers of the Gospel to the Muslim world keep this important pillar of Islam's religious system. A few of them have talked freely about doing this in their newsletters to their constituents.(1) The reason most often given for doing this is, "I wish to identify with the feelings of the Muslims and to understand them better."

It is my thesis that such a practice by Christian missionaries is misguided, naive and dangerous. It is misguided because no one from the West can possibly hope to empathize with those raised in a Muslim culture, who have observed Ramadan year after year, by observing such a fast for one month.(2) It is naive because it ignores all other relationships involved in such a practice.(3) It is dangerous because all false religious systems are Enemy-inspired counterfeits to the Gospel.(4) I will list the following considerations:

1. To observe Ramadan is to engage in the occult. Every one of the pillars of Islamic faith and practice is of hostile origin. When a missionary observes any one of them, he links himself to demonic intervention and will surely reap from such investment. Would the same missionary recite the creed several times a day to discover what a Muslim feels? Or would he pray five times a day for a month to discover inner responses? To observe Ramadan is identical to observing any of the remaining four pillars of this faith.(5)

2. To observe Ramadan is to confuse Muslim converts everywhere. If there is one pillar which recurs regularly to plague the liberated Muslim convert, it is Ramadan. The pressures he then faces, every year, are beyond the Westerner's ability to experience: family, community in general, occupational and--basically--religious pressures. When the convert has broken loose from these pressures and is trusting Christ to keep him, he suddenly discovers that the missionary who carries the Gospel to bring about his liberation from Islam is now observing a pillar in that religion--a pillar used of the enemy to enslave that convert for so many years in the past. Such confusion could result in the convert's lapse into Islam.

3. To observe Ramadan is to confuse the minority churches in the East. Granted, these minority churches have resorted to all kinds of subterfuge for the past 13 centuries to survive in the midst of Islamic culture. However, they have been united in one area: never have any of them taken up any of the pillars of Islam, for whatever reason!(6) Now they learn that the Christian missionary--usually from America--is observing an important part of that system which has caused them so much grief throughout their long history. Such confusion of practice makes them either think such a missionary is a fool, childishy naive, or a person to be henceforth avoided.

4. To observe Ramadan is to confuse the serious Muslim inquirer. Consider the situation of an inquirer who has begun to question the validity of the Muslim faith. The Holy Spirit has begun to convict him as he prays, gives alms, recites the creed, goes on the Meccan pilgrimage--and observes Ramadan. He has come to see the uselessness of such observations and the human effort behind them.(7) Now he learns that the missionary he has respected for sharing the Gospel with him is observing one of these important pillars of the faith he himself has begun to question. Is it not obvious how confused he must be? Surely, he must, or might be, wrong in his present ambivalence regarding Islam. Perhaps he has been hasty in thinking to leave the cultural and religious fold in which he has been raised.(8)

5. To observe Ramadan is to send a signal to one's own family that Islam is not all bad. The child is much more impressed by Dad's actions than by his words. If Dad is keeping Ramadan, then either Ramadan is not totally evil as a practice or else it should be considered simply as a cultural practice and should be left in place.(9) The children of several missionary families may get together once in awhile and discuss what some of their dads are doing. Can you imagine the confusion evident in such discussion?

6. To observe Ramadan is to declare that external works render a person acceptable to God. Merit is to be gained by fasting during Ramadan.(10) The missionary who observes this month of fasting is declaring: "For by works are you saved through faith, and that of yourselves." When Muslims know of the missionary's participation in Ramadan observance, how difficult it is afterward for that missionary to share a Gospel of grace with the Muslim inquirer. The message is confused and has lost its distinctiveness; it is now one of a large number of human schemes to reach God.

7. To observe Ramadan is to declare that the other four Pillars of Islam are equally valid. There is no logical reason why the missionary would not perform the other pillars: creed recital, daily prayers, almsgiving and the pilgrimage.(11) How difficult for the Muslim to appreciate the missionary's inconsistency!

8. To observe Ramadan is to confess that Allah miraculously delivered Muhammad's enemies into his hands. It is an historical fact that Ramadan was not made obligatory upon Muslims until after the Muslims defeated a much larger military force than their own at both Badr and Ta'if. To participate in the fast is to commemorate and to confess that it was divine intervention and acceptance of Islam that the Muslim faith has survived.(12)

9. To observe Ramadan is to declare that the Qur'an is a book from God. The ninth month of the Muslim calendar was selected solely for the purpose of commemorating the descent of the Qur'an on the 27th night of that month. It is the holiest night in all the year to the Muslim. It is difficult for this writer to understand how a missionary can so confuse the Muslim over the matter of true revelation, as he does when he observes fasting during this month.

Ramadan should be seen in theological terms and not in anthropological ones. This is the month on the 27th night of which, the night of power or the night of the decree, the Qur'an is said to have descended--an extraction from the Mother of the Book according to Muslim tradition.(13) Pious men sit each evening in the mosque, reciting specified portions of the Qur'an. It is an extremely religious month.(14) Let us not be deceived by those to whom Ramadan is only a cultural event in the Islamic calendar. It is not.(15) Those who are not pious Muslims use the month, it is true, as a time to visit late into the night, or to frequent the burlesque cafes. These populist practices, however, do not mitigate the essential theological significance of the month of Ramadan.(16)

One suggested solution for the missionary is that he observe a different thirty day period and encourage Muslim converts to do likewise; missiologists are well acquainted with this mechanism of functional substitution. However, it will always be extremely difficult to avoid the meritorious dimension of the converts' background in Islam. A Bible conference could be held throughout the month of Ramadan itself, filling the void felt by the Muslim convert church. Any fasting by the missionary or convert, however, during Ramadan, will send an erroneous message to the Muslim community.

In the light of these considerations, it is the conclusion of this Islamicist that Christian workers among Muslims should not participate in Ramadan observance. The risk of being misunderstood is too great at every level. There are other and more biblical ways in which to identify with Muslims in their physical and spiritual predicaments. Let us be creative enough to discover such avenues and glorify the Lord in the process.(17)

Endnotes

1. "In 1982, in the Muslim country of our residence, I kept the entire month of Muslim fast. ... During these fifteen hours, for thirty extremely hot days, I ate no food and drank no liquid. I sought to follow each prohibition as prescribed by the Quran and Hadith. ... It was a special delight to share the light refreshment (iftar) at the daily breaking of the fast with Muslim friends. There was an expressed appreciation that I, a Christian missionary, would participate in such a rigorous discipline of fasting with them. This led to a time of joyous celebration together" (Parshall 1985:223-4). One must question whether they feel joy because they appreciate his expression of identification, or, what is more likely, because they think he is finally appreciating their religion as the true one?

2. Do not those who equate keeping Ramadan with spiritual maturity confuse culture with theology? Goldsmith writes: "True fasting has a significant place in Christian devotion. Is it permissible to introduce a fast month along Muslim lines into a Christian church? Of course it must be voluntary and practiced in conjunction with prayer. Good teaching from the New Testament would then instruct believers in the basic principles of Christian fasting. ... Some new converts from Islam rebel against everything to do with their old form of religion and may prefer to make a clean break, renouncing even the cultural forms of Islam. After an initial period, however, they may develop sufficient spiritual maturity to enjoy having their Christian faith dressed in Islamic cultural garb. And many other Muslims may find it easier to become Christians if this does not involve a total break with all that they have loved in their upbringing. We do not want people to be discouraged from Christian discipleship by the church's alien nature." (Goldsmith 1982:140) emphasis mine). In the same vein, Parshall writes: "It is obvious that fasting cannot be legislated for Christians. There is, however, a place for a voluntary participation in the fast within Muslim contexts. I have often protested the tendency for converts to feel liberated from Islamic legalisms and thus end up as Christians with much less spiritual discipline than they had as Muslims. There is also the issue of

inquirers. Many seekers would feel more comfortable in pursuing truth in a community where spiritual forms are not that distinct from those which they have followed throughout their lives" (1985:223, 224, 225).

3. "On the surface, an effort to empathize with Muslims during this sacred month by joining them in the fast is highly commendable. At the same time, there are hidden factors which need to be carefully explored, e.g., why are Muslims fasting? It is the month in which Muslims believe the Quran was revealed. It may be that the Christian feels uncomfortable about giving such a witness. Perhaps a better alternative would be to fast during Lent. ..." (Dretke 1979:225,226). Many missiologists, however, choose to ignore those "hidden factors."

4. Many overlook the deep convictions expressed in the Muslim's observance of Ramadan; "the validity of the fast is determined by the niyah (intention) of the Muslim." (Farah 1970:144). Marsh wisely seeks to relate to these when Muslims ask, "Why do you Christians not fast?" To which he replies: "Christians do fast ... but they do not fast during Ramadan. To understand why Christians do not observe Ramadan, you must remember why you fast (niya). You fast so that God will forgive your sins. Christians already have God's forgiveness because Christ paid their debt. God has forgiven us by His mercy without our good works" (Marsh 1975:24).

5. One prominent Muslim propagandist puts it like this: "What prayer seeks to accomplish five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan ... does once a year." (Maududi p101).

6. Fasting was practiced in the area long before Islam. "'Those before you' [2:183,185] alludes to other devotees of Allah, such as the Jews who fasted on the day of Atonement, but more probably to the Eastern Christians who fasted for thirty-six days. Ritual fasting was not known to Arabia of the Jahiliyah" (Farah 1970:143). That last sentence needs to be qualified, however: "The Sabaeans fasted thirty days every year and celebrated the Eid. The fast was prolonged by one day, should the new moon not be clearly visible on Eid. Again this practice was incorporated in the new religion of Islam. In the Mishna Berakoth (Jewish Talmud) it was said that fasting should begin and stop at the time when one could begin to distinguish between a white and black thread. This custom has also been incorporated in Islamic traditions" (Nehls p97) .

7. "Muslims believe ... that during Ramadhan the gates of Paradise are open and the gates of Hell closed, and that all who keep the Fast will be pardoned of all their past venial (excusable) sins"(Budd p45)

8. Parshall evokes "... the deep emotional dimension of umrah which is resident within the rigorous ritual of keeping the annual fast. Muslims who dare to break the sociological and religious strictures of the fast are subject to legal and communal penalties. ... I have asked Muslims if spirituality can be legislated. ... Muslims believe that the life submitted to God is a total experience and must embrace law as well as spirit. Therefore, it is not inconsistent to use law to enforce that which is Islamic. So the fast, Muslims will affirm,

must be an external as well as an internal ritual. The physical body must be purified as well as the heart. Muslims declare that governmental legislation can actually assist the believer in his spiritual journey" (Parshall 1985:42, 43).

9. In 1969, President Bourguiba of Tunisia tried to abolish the fast. "He tried to secure a fetwa or religious ruling on this issue from the theological authorities in Tunis, but they refused to rule in his favor. Apparently he offered dispensations anyway, but most Tunisians kept the fast, their loyalty to Islam overriding the patriotic appeals of their president" (Fry & King 1982:145, 146).

10. "The fast is a debt owed to God (din) and an obligation (fard). It is said to partly atone for one's sins, to help control the passions, and to merit a place in paradise. The Muslim must declare his intention to fast (niya) before dawn each day" (Marsh 1975:22).

11. From an Ahmadiyya lecture in West Africa; "The Gospel is more than words to be believed. It is a message to be lived. That's why we do our prayers five times in the day. That's why we confess there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet. That's why we fast during the month of Ramadan, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca. That's why we give our money to the poor" (Dretke 1979:64, 65).

12. According to Hahn, "At the Battle of Badr (2 A.H.) the Muslims, though badly outnumbered, severely defeated the Meccans. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the profound religious significance of this stunning victory, particularly for the early Muslims. God was clearly vindicating the faith of the new community" (Hahn p9).

13. "At the beginning of his ministry Muhammad fasted, as the Jews did, on the 10th day of the first month. Later he fixed instead the whole month of Ramadhan (the ninth month). During this month occurs the Laylatu-l-qadar (night of power) on which the Quran is believed to have been brought down to the lowest heaven, ready to be revealed to Muhammad" (Abd-Ul-Masih p25).

14. Maududi, a Muslim, writes: "What is it that makes us voluntarily undergo such hardships? It is nothing but belief in God and the fear of Him and the day we will return to Him. Every moment during our fast we suppress our passions, and by so doing proclaim the supremacy of the Law of God. This great test keeps us extremely conscious of our duties and so strengthens our faith. By denying ourselves of the most basic necessity of life, an unparalleled spirit of patience is built within us. Difficulty and discipline during this month bring us face to face with the realities of life and help us make our life during the rest of the year one of true subservience to God's will" (Maududi p102).

15. "Many Christians refer to this fast as the 'feast' of Ramadan, and thus show their entire lack of sympathy for the suffering Muslims. The Christian worker should not give the impression that he also is fasting, but he will abstain from eating or drinking in front of them" (Marsh 1975:23). This is a good word from a veteran of many years spent among Muslims.

16. Contrast the idealism of the Muslim apologist and the sociological explanation of the missionary. Maududi: "All Muslims irrespective of status must fast during the same month. This brings into the open the true equality of men and thus goes a long way towards creating feelings of love and brotherhood among them. During Ramadhan, evil conceals itself, while good comes to the fore. The whole atmosphere is filled with cleanliness, righteousness, and purity" (p102). Parshall: "Here one sees the society acting in concert. The fast becomes 'easy' because everyone is doing it. Celebrations of communal eating at the end of the day have a powerful bonding effect. Islam is much more homogeneous because of the fast" (1985:43).

17. In referring to I Cor. 9:22, Dretke has some suggestions as to what "all things to all men" might involve in ministry to Muslims. "Could it mean fasting and Scripture reading during the month of Ramadan? Might it mean contributing to the building of a mosque or an Arabic school? Could it mean joining in the celebration of a Muslim feast? Might it mean meditating quietly in the back of a mosque while Muslims recite the Friday prayers?" (1979:150). This writer must, however, agree with Marsh's declaration. "Some missionaries have tried to show love and sympathy for the Muslims by fasting with them during Ramadan, but without the intention of thereby gaining merit. But this has not been understood and has not really helped win any Muslims for Christ" (1975:25).

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FROM THE ARABIC LANGUAGE PRESS

[The following is a sampling from 12 pages of extracts collected by an Arab Christian brother who wishes to remain anonymous. He reads widely in Arabic language publications to keep abreast of developments in the Arab World in his ministry, and has translated and collected extracts which he has sent to SEEDBED with the idea that others may also find them useful. They give an "'inside' view of the Arab mind." We decided not to publish the entire document for various reasons, but will be happy to send a copy to any reader requesting one (if you are able to send a \$1 for postage and photocopying it would be appreciated). Besides those reproduced here, other extracts criticize the policy of "Informational Security" (censorship) in the Gulf states, and the lack of democracy in the AW in general, and critique several contemporary Arab plays and books, etc. Most of the extracts are from al-Mostakbal, published in Paris. The remarks in brackets below are by the translator. Ed.]

On the Bleak Economic Prospects of the Arab World (Keywords: Future, Pessimism, Hopelessness), by Ibrahim Salameh, in al-Mostakbal, 14 June 1986.

At the beginning of 1986, the number of Arabic speaking people reached 202 million people according to the United Nations. More than 2/3 of them live in Africa (143 million): in Egypt and the Sudan (75 million) and in the Maghribi states (68 million only!). The illiteracy rate is still between 70% and 72% of the above mentioned number. According to FAO, 35 million of the Arabs living in Africa suffer from malnutrition and may reach the stage of the "Ethiopian Famine."

At the same time, those Arab countries with large populations are in debt and are suffering from economic depression. They owe only 70 billion dollars! The level of education at the universities of these countries is about 30 years behind the world level.

Let us not keep blaming the big powers for the ills of the Arab countries. Are the big powers to blame for the fact that Khartoum has not been linked to the countryside with proper roads which would have helped bring food to the capital? Have the big powers stopped the electrification of the streets of Cairo which remain dark for these ten years?

[After lamenting the backwardness of the Arabs of today, the author makes the following comment]: BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE THERE