

# The History Of Fasting

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Fasting, abstention from food, and often also from drink, for a longer than usual period. Fasting has been practiced for centuries in connection with religious ceremonies.

Fasts are observed among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Confucianists, Hindus, Taoists, Jainists, and adherents of other religious faiths. Although Buddhism stresses moderation in eating rather than fasting, Buddhists in some countries, notably Tibet, observe certain fasts.

Originally, fasting was one of a number of rites in which physical activities were reduced or suspended, resulting in a state of quiescence comparable, symbolically, to death, or to the state preceding birth. Fasts were also part of the fertility rites in primitive ceremonies.

Many of these ceremonies were held at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and survived for centuries. Some scholars connect the symbolic use of matzo, or unleavened bread, by the Jews during the spring festival of Pesach, or Passover, with these early origins.

Traces of these ancient rites are found also in the fast observed by many Christians during Lent as a preparation for Easter.

Closely associated with fasts to induce fertility were fasts intended to avert catastrophe or to serve as penance for sin. Native North Americans held tribal fasts to avert threatening disasters. The Native Americans of Mexico and the Incas of Peru observed penitential fasts to appease their gods. Among the peoples of the Old World, the Assyrians and the Babylonians especially, and others to a lesser extent, observed fasts as a form of penance.

Among Jews, fasting as a form of penitence and purification has been observed annually on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, since its traditional designation by Moses. On this holy day neither food nor drink is permitted. The fast by day, but not after dark, observed by Muslims during the month of Ramadan also is a form of atonement.

The early Christians associated fasting with penitence and purification (see Matthew 6:16; Mark 9:29). During the first two centuries of its existence, the Christian church established fasting as a voluntary preparation for receiving the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism and for the ordination of priests.

Later, these fasts became obligatory, as did others subsequently added. In the 6th century the Lenten fast was expanded from its original 40 hours, the time spent by Christ in the grave, to 40 days, on each of which only one meal was permitted.

After the Reformation, fasting was retained by most Protestant churches and was made optional in some cases. Stricter Protestants like the Puritans, however, condemned not only the festivals of the church, but its traditional fasts as well. The Orthodox church observes fasts rigorously.

Fasting has been criticized from early times. Many Old Testament prophets and early Christian writers condemned the abuse of fasting as an empty formality by persons who led immoral lives. In modern times criticism of fasting has been based principally on other grounds.

Physicians and psychologists have challenged the indiscriminate practice of rigorous fasting, maintaining that it is frequently harmful. Custom, moreover, has greatly modified the manner in which fasting is observed. With marked exceptions, selective fasting rather than total abstinence is the rule today.

In the Roman Catholic church fasting may involve partial abstinence from food and drink (as in the fast before partaking of Holy Communion) or total abstinence. Roman Catholic fast days now are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In the United States, fasting is observed chiefly by Episcopalians and Lutherans among Protestants, by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and by Roman Catholics.

In modern times the hunger strike, a form of fasting, has been employed as a political weapon. Innumerable political prisoners in various parts of the world, including conscientious objectors in the U.S., have engaged in hunger strikes. Mohandas Gandhi, leader of the struggle for India's freedom, undertook fasts occasionally to compel his followers to obey his precept of nonviolence.

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