

## Fasting: A Sacramental

Hunger or starvation is never sought as a goal, though for millions today it is a daily lived experience. Although deprivation of essential goods for one's maintenance is also never viewed as something holy or ideal, the world religions have regarded fasting as a powerful means for attaining the spiritual benefits. Whether voluntarily undertaken or imposed by the religious authority, such fasting is a sacramental in both western and eastern religions and so this article proposes to examine various aspects of it in these religious traditions.

### I

#### 1. Variety of Meanings

The term 'fast' or fasting has been understood in a number of ways. It also includes what is known as 'abstinence' in Christian literature. 'Fast' in a general sense is abstinence from food or drink, but strictly observed, it denotes complete abstention from food and drink. It is also applied to the use of a diet somewhat severely limited either by the rejection of certain customary kinds of food or by the diminution of the quantity of food consumed. Fasting in the former sense is required as necessary preparation for a surgical operation; in the latter sense it is often recommended for health reasons.<sup>1</sup> The latin term 'jejunium' denotes as animal intestine which is always empty.<sup>2</sup> Complete abstention from food and drink may be for a limited period of time, as prescribed by the Church in preparation for Holy Communion or without any time limit. In this latter sense it has been used in recent times as a means to protest against an undesirable law or an act of injustice and thus to procure the concession of the demand or, failing that, the death of the person fasting occurs.

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1. Cf. *Fasting, Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9, (Chicago: 1962), p. 106.

2. Cf. J. D. O'Neill, *Fast, Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 5, (New York: 1913), p. 789.

Fast denoting abstinence from all kinds of food and drink as described above is known as 'Natural Fast'.

From a philosophical standpoint fast, abstinence from food and drink, was conceived as an essential discipline for the attainment of true knowledge. Examples of this are to be found among philosophers, especially the Stoic and Neoplatonist such as Epictetus, Simplicius, Plotinus, Porphyry etc. In their search for truth they wanted to purify the spirit in order that it might better perceive the truth. The means they adopted was detachment from matter and material appetites by fasting.<sup>3</sup>

Fast is also undertaken with a religious motive and as such it means abstaining from food as an act of self-denial for the sake of the purification of the soul and its consequent union with God. As an ascetical practice fasting is largely prescribed by a vast majority of religions, in the lower, middle and higher cultures alike.<sup>4</sup> Christianity adopted the practice of fasting found in the pre-Christian religions and especially in the Old Testament and gave it a preeminent position in the Church. Christ Himself fasted,<sup>5</sup> although He laid down no rules on the subject. He taught that fasting is necessary,<sup>6</sup> but it was left to the Church to prescribe the rules that were to govern the concrete practice of fasting. The Christian literature of the first century speaks of spiritual fast as opposed to physical fast. This constitutes an act of refraining from something that is related to the intellect and will. In the patristic writers 'Spiritual Fast' means the avoidance of sin.<sup>7</sup> The idea of spiritual fast was meant to inculcate in the minds of the faithful the primacy of the internal element in the practice of fasting, namely, leading a good Christian Life, and the avoidance of sin to which the physical fasting was only a means.<sup>8</sup> Spiritual fast being personal and subjective, it is only the latter which can become the object of legislation and our study.

3. Cf H. Musurillo, *The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers*, Traditio vol. 12 (New York : 1956), p. 11 ff.

4. Cf *Fasting*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. cit., vol. 9, p. 106.

5. Lk 4:2.

6. Mk 11:19 ff; 9:28.

7. F. Bran, *De Jejunio Ecclesiastico in genere deque Jejunio Ecclesiae orientalis in Specie* (Mango Varandini : 1889), p. 5.

8. Cf Musurillo, *art. cit.* pp. 35 ff.

## 2. Fasting and Spiritual Life

The Spiritual life is conceived as that way of life which helps man to realize himself, to realize the end and purpose of his life through the attainment of God and union with Him. Since most of the religions recognize in man powers and tendencies opposed to the attainment of this end, renunciation, which destroys or restrains these powers, is strictly, enjoined on man to strengthen the spirit. Fasting strengthens the spirit of renunciation. The necessity of fasting in spiritual or ascetical life is clear from the universal practice of religions, which are the custodians and advocates of ascetical life. The priest of Isis in Egypt practised moderation in food and drink and avoided flesh eating and fish. Abstinence from rich food, flesh and wine was necessary for initiation into the mysteries of Isis.<sup>9</sup> The great importance Hinduism gives to fasting will be discussed in the second part of this article. In Greek asceticism, Pythagoras recommended frugality in diet and commended fasting. In Muhammadanism asceticism was not in keeping with the Prophet's outlook, but it later took root in Islam; abstinence from various kinds of food, as well as the strict observance of fasts, were regarded as means to bring a man closer to God. Buddhism is a very ascetic religion and prescribes many fasts, although Buddha himself was opposed to excessive ascetic practices.<sup>10</sup>

The necessity of practising renunciation or fasting is said to arise from the very natural condition of man, although sometimes it has been made obligatory by positive law. It is argued that every rational creature is bound to labour intelligently for the subjugation of concupiscence, namely, to subordinate the material element in man to the spiritual element, adopting means commensurate with the attainment of this end. Positive human laws interpret this necessity and formulate the details for the observance of fasting and other ascetical practices. These laws prescribed by the religious authorities are binding on the believer.

Self-abnegation was proposed by Christ as an absolute condition for following Him.<sup>11</sup> Paul puts it emphatically: "If you live after the flesh, you shall die, but if through the spirit you mortify the deeds

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9. Cf. J. A. Mac Culloch, *Fasting*, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 5, (New York: 1912), p. 764.

10. Cf *Ibid.*

11. Cf Mt 10:38 ff.

of the flesh, you shall live".<sup>12</sup> The teaching of the Fathers and spiritual authors, is full of praise for the practice of fasting. Right from the start the Christian Church has not only officially proclaimed and defended its teaching on the matter,<sup>13</sup> but has also laid down definite rules and norms according to which the faithful are to practise this means of mortification.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Non-Ascetic Fast

To investigate the origin of fasting it seems necessary to set aside for the time being its ascetic nature and its religious character. For even men who had no clear idea of religion and asceticism, or had no religious idea or motive, fasted.

#### i. *Motive for Fasting*

The motives for which man started voluntary fasting are many and varied. It may be an act of penitence or of propitiation; a preparatory rite before some act of sacramental eating or an initiation; a mourning ceremony; one of a series of purificatory rites; a means of inducing dreams and visions; a method of adding force to magical rites. Periodical or partial fasts were enforced for the sake of health. So also there are instances of special fasts for women, youths and children.

Among the various motives mentioned above, which led men to fasting, magic seems to have been the first according to some. "The origin of fasting", says Mac Culloch, "is complex, but on the whole it seems to have been adopted at first for magical reasons."<sup>15</sup> Here fasting is a preparation for the magical rite. The man who fasts makes his magical act more feasible by his being in a purer state of body for it.

Next to this comes the practice of fasting to have dreams and visions. Thus, when men wished to have vivid dreams, the recollection of the fact that enforced abstinence from food was supposed to be

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12. Rom 8:13; Col 3:5; Gal 5:24.

13. Cf Hefele-Leclercq, *Hist. des Conciles*, vol. I, (Paris:1907), p. 1041.

14. Mac Culloch, *art. cit.*, p. 759.

15. Cf Mac Culloch, *Austerities, op. cit.*, vol. 2 (New York : 1909), p. 230.

connected with such dream-experiences and so would undertake fasting in the hope of obtaining them.<sup>16</sup>

ii. *Fasting on certain Occasions in Life*

Among many peoples severe fasts are prescribed for parents, especially for the mother, before and after the birth of a child. This is due to the direct influence food is supposed to have on life. Similar practices are also prescribed for tribal girls at the time of the first menstrual period. The time of preparation for marriage was another occasion of such fasting. Also, after the marriage, the newly married couples are subjected to fasting.

Abstinence from food in connection with the death of a person is perhaps the most common practice related to fasting, although different motives are attributed to this. The love for the departed, dear ones, and the consequent sorrow at their death made one forget his meals or unmindful of the pangs of hunger. Gradually, however, this became a set practice and conventional sign of mourning. Some find its origin in the sacrifices of animals or of other food materials, offered in honour of the dead. Others think that the fear of touching or using things contaminated by the contact of the dead, or the idea of preventing the ghost of the dead man from entering the body along with food, led people to abstain from food at the death of a person.<sup>17</sup>

On the same lines as the above is the fast undertaken at initiation. 'Initiation' is admission to ceremonies or traditions of a religious or magical order. It includes also admission to the different classes in the primitive society formed by groups of persons of the same sex, age and interests.

Fasting is also very religious in character since it is intended for atonement of sins and appeasement of the deities. Such fasting is invariably combined with prayer to seek pardon of the offended gods and for averting further calamities and punishments. This comes close to the magical fasting which forces the deity to grant the petitions and is certainly a development of it. Fasting as an act of penitence is found among all ancient peoples. Thus fasting has been practised with some religious motives and also with natural motives of

16. Cf Mac Culloch, *Fasting, op. cit.*, vol. 5, pp. 759-762.

17. Cf F. Cabrol, *Jeûnes*, DAFL, Vol. VII, 2, Col. 2481-2482.

sobriety and physical cleansing and for the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of temperance, preached by sages and philosophers of old.

#### 4. Fast among the Jews

The Jewish belief about the human situation which calls for penance and fasting is based on the account of man's fall in the book of Genesis: "Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day so ever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death."<sup>18</sup> But, as the Bible testifies, under the inspiration of the evil one, man wanted to become independent of God and this led to the transgression of the command. Among the calamities that followed this transgression was the necessity for man to impose upon himself, a much more rigorous law of abstinence, self-control and self-affliction, on account of the rising of the bodily passions against the powers of his soul. The Hebrew word for fasting 'tsoum' properly expresses the idea of voluntary abstinence from food, above all, with a religious end. It does not however exclude the idea of mourning and penance. So it is often translated by a very comprehensive expression, 'to afflict one's soul.'<sup>19</sup>

##### i. *Kinds of Fasting*

The facts in vogue among the Jews were many. But only the one on the feast of Atonement seems to have been imposed by the Law as obligatory, on the whole nation. Other fasts were either voluntary or compulsory only for certain persons or groups of persons. This fast was also the most ancient and the most famous in the Law. Fasting implying abstinence was ordained by law for the day of Atonement.<sup>20</sup> The ceremony integral to this feast was observed by the Jews on the fifth day before the feast of the Tabernacles. From evening of the ninth until the evening of the tenth day labour and eating were strictly prohibited.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes extra-ordinary fasts were prescribed for the expiation of certain sins. Thus we see the people of Israel fasting according

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18. Gen 2:16, 17.

19. Cf F. Cabrol, *op. cit.*

20. Lev. 16:29 ff.

21. Lev. 23:27-32.

to the instruction of Samuel, for their sin of idolatry.<sup>22</sup> We have another example of such a fast in II Esd. IX, 1. There are numerous passages in the Scriptures which show how adversity moved the Jews to take to fasting and abstinence. The occasion could be a war,<sup>23</sup> a punishment announced by prophets,<sup>24</sup> or any other present or future evil.<sup>25</sup>

The ceremonies connected with annual days of great events in the history of Israel often included fasting. Thus the Jews observed abstinence on the ninth day of the fourth month, because on that day Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> On the tenth day of the fifth month, because on that day the temple was burned;<sup>27</sup> on the third day of the seventh month, because on that day Godolias was murdered;<sup>28</sup> and on the tenth day of the tenth month, because on that day the Chaldees commenced the siege of Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> They were told that fidelity to these regulations would bring joy, gladness and great solemnities to the house of Juda.<sup>30</sup> During the month of new corn they were obliged to spend seven days without leaven, and to eat the bread of affliction in memory of their deliverance from Egypt.<sup>31</sup>

Besides the above-mentioned fasts which were observed in common, we come across in the Old Testament several instances of private fasting. Moses fasted forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai.<sup>32</sup> Elias journeyed for forty days fasting.<sup>33</sup> Daniel, the Prophet, fasted in preparation for receiving the revelation.<sup>34</sup> Esther humbled herself with sackcloths and fasts.<sup>35</sup> Judith fasted all the days of her life.<sup>36</sup> There are numerous other instances of persons and communities resorting to fasting.

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22. I Kgs 7:6.

23. Judg 20 : 26.

24. Joel 1 : 4; 2 : 15.

25. Cf Judith 6 : 20.

26. Jer 52 : 4 ff.

27. Jer 52 : 12 ff

28. Jer 41 : 2.

29. IV Kgs 25:1 ff.

30. Zech 8:19

31. Deut 16:3

32. Ex 34:28.

33. III Kgs 19:8.

34. Dan 9:3.

35. Esth 14:2.

36. Judith 8:6

Besides these occasional or strictly private fasts, there were other private fasts which, however, were regularly observed by pious Jews. The main among such fasts of devotion were the fasts of Monday and Thursday.<sup>37</sup> Such fasts of devotion were of later origin and were prescribed by the Sanhedrin and Synagogues. The fasts of Monday and Thursday are mentioned also in the Gospel.<sup>38</sup>

## ii. *Nature of the Jewish Fasts*

Fasting is never an isolated exercise. It is supposed to help prayer. Other acts of penance are invariably added to fast. These were doing without bath, the use of ashes, continence etc.<sup>39</sup> As for the nature of the food itself, we have many prescriptions. Prohibition of blood is found among the orders given by God to Noe after the deluge.<sup>40</sup> Corn, oil, wine and the first born of herds and cattle were forbidden in towns.<sup>41</sup> A detailed enumeration of various beasts, birds, and fish which, being reputed as unclean, come under the ban, is given in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus.

From the examples of fast we have discussed above it is clear that the Jewish fasts had for their motive either mourning or penitence to appease God either for warding off his punishments or for seeking his favours. The prohibition of things declared unclean was, of course, intended to train the Israelites in the pursuit of spiritual cleanliness. A real ascetical character or motive is absent at least until the later periods.

A more ascetical view, however, slowly developed at a later period, especially among the Alexandrian Jews. "Among the later Jews", says Mac Culloch, "while fasting was regarded as a meritorious rather than as an ascetical practice, individuals occasionally led strictly ascetic lives, eating as little food as possible. We reach a consistent ascetic view only among the Alexandrian Jews, who held that bodily desires hindered spirituality, and that only through a strict asceticism could the soul be released from their power..."<sup>42</sup>

37. Cf *Duchasne, Origines du culte Hretien*. (Paris: 1903), p. 228;

38. Mt 9:14-15; Mk 2:18 Lk 5:33.

39. Is 58:3; Judith 4:7; 8:6.

40. Gen 9:4.

41. Deut 12:17.

42. Cf. *op. cit.*



## 5. Fasting in the Life of Christ

As a Jew Christ must have observed all the Jewish fasts then in practice as he did observe the other prescriptions of the Law, although no mention of this is found in the Gospels. The only example that we find, and an excellent one, is the fast in the desert. Before beginning his public life Christ fasted forty days and forty nights in the desert. (*Lk* 4:2).

This fast would seem to be of great significance to his followers because after his baptism in the Jordan this is the only event recorded of Christ as a grown-up man, before his public appearance as a preacher. But coming to preach his new kingdom, and promulgating the New Covenant, he did not set aside any prescription about fasting. But several times in his preachings Christ mentioned fasting. He exhorted his disciples to fast without ostentation, as did the Pharisees, thus emphasizing the internal effects aimed at by the external observance of Law.<sup>43</sup> Explaining to his disciples who could not cast out a devil, Christ said, "This kind can go out by nothing but by prayer and fasting."<sup>44</sup> Defending his disciples against the Pharisees, who accused them because they did not fast, Christ says that they cannot fast since the spouse is still with them and he predicts that there will come a time when they will fast.<sup>45</sup> Thus Christ expressed in unmistakable terms His appreciation of this valuable exercise.

## 6. The Practice of the First Christians

### i. *The Example and Preaching of the Apostles*

The Apostles and the first converts to Christianity were all Jews. Together with many other Jewish customs they also kept up the Jewish fasts.<sup>46</sup> The example of Christ gave them further impetus to practise fasting. In the Acts of the Apostles we find several instances of fasting. St Paul, after his conversion, fasted for three days.<sup>47</sup> Paul and Barnabas were chosen by the Holy Spirit when they were engaged in prayer and fasting with the other disciples who, again after prayer

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43. Mt 6:16-18

44. Mk 9:28.

45. Mt 9:14-15; Mk 2:18-20; Lk 5:33-35.

46. Cf. Gal 4:9-10; Rom 14:5; 2-3; Acts 10:14.

47. Acts 9:9.

and fasting, ordained them and sent them away.<sup>48</sup> And Paul and Barnabas in their turn are also found praying and fasting before ordaining priests in the Churches they founded.<sup>49</sup>

It was St. Paul who in clear terms exposed the principles of a real and Christian asceticism, which has for its object the subordination of the lower appetites to the dictates of right reason and the law of God, with continued and necessary cultivation of the virtues which the creator intended man to possess. In his Epistle to the Galatians St. Paul says, "Walk in the Spirit: and you shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit..."<sup>50</sup> And he continues, "And they that are Christ's have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences."<sup>51</sup> To the Romans he says, "For if you live according to the flesh, you shall die; but if you by the Spirit mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live."<sup>52</sup> This doctrine was further elaborated by the Fathers and put into practice by the first Christians. One of the most important means of practising it was, naturally, fasting.

## ii. *The First Two Centuries*

Following the example of Christ and the Apostles, the first Christians practised fasting. The first two centuries of the Christian era constitute a very special period in the matter of the discipline of fasting. The main characteristic of this period is the lack of general rules concerning fasting. There was, just a general feeling of the duty of fasting. Customs and practices varied from place to place. Much was left to individual piety. Another characteristic of this period is the vast quantity of literature on the matter. The Christian writers and the Fathers of the Church warmly exhorted the faithful to observe this holy practice. Examples of such exhortations are found in Barnabas,<sup>53</sup> Hermas,<sup>54</sup> Policarp,<sup>55</sup> Justin,<sup>56</sup> Clement of Alexandria,<sup>57</sup> Ter-

48. Acts 13:2-3.

49. Acts 14:22.

50. Gal 5:16-17.

51. Gal 5:24.

52. Rom 8:13.

53. *Epistola Catholica*, 3.7 *Patralogia Greca*, vol 2, col. 729-730; 743-744.

54. *Similitudo* 5, *Patralogia Greca*, vol. 2, col 957-958.

55. *Epistola ad Philipenses* 7, *Patralogia Greca*, vol 5, col. 1044-1045.

56. *Dialogus* 15, *Patralogia Greca*, vol. 6, col. 506-507.

57. *Stromatum Lib.* 6, cap. 12, *Patralogia Greca*, vol. 9, col. 323.

tullian,<sup>58</sup> and others. Tertullian has a separate treatise on the subject called 'De Jeuniis'.

In this period because of the absence of general prescriptions, fasts were observed differently in different places. The main fasts more commonly observed were, the Paschal fast, the Weekly fasts of Wednesday and Friday and the Pre-baptismal fast.

The first Christians fasted voluntarily, moved by private devotion, following the example of Christ and the Apostles. There was great freedom with regard to the time of fasting as well as the manner of fasting. Each one fasted when he wanted and as long as he wanted, although, as we have already mentioned, there were other fasts observed by all.<sup>59</sup> Customs were slowly evolving, both, with regard to the duration of fast as well as the food regulations. Fast, in those days, was complete and absolute. It consisted of abstention from all food and drink, even water; fast was complete abstinence. Abstinence, as it is now understood, namely, abstention from certain kinds of food, was unknown in those days. The fast lasted the whole day from morning till evening. On the days of fast liturgy was celebrated in the evening, and this marked the termination of fast, and after the liturgy the meal for the day was eaten.<sup>60</sup> However, as we have already observed, there were half-fasts, namely the fasts of Wednesday and Friday which ended at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The period from 200 A.D. to 500 A.D. was a time of change and development in the discipline of fasting, as in other matters relating to ecclesiastical discipline. This difference is very pronounced especially in the fourth century because of the cessation of persecutions, which made the Church free and its organization easier. The celebration of Councils, provincial as well as general, furnished the Church with general norms in the area of discipline. Fasting also, which was hitherto a matter of voluntary or customary observance, now came under certain rules.

On account of the greater freedom the Church enjoyed during this period, and the fight she was forced to wage against heresies, there came into existence an enormous quantity of literature about the doc-

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58. *De Oratone* 18, *Patrologia Latina* vol. 1, col. 1178.

59. Cf. F. Bran, *op. cit.*, p. 11 sq.

60. Cf. F. Cabrol, *art. cit.*, col. 2485.

trines as well as the discipline of the Church. Such literature concerning fasting is found in Tertullian, Origen, Dionisius of Alexandria, Eusebius, Basil, Epiphanius, Augustine, Socrates and others. In the pseudo-apostolic collections such as the Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles, the Teachings of the Apostles, the Apostolic Constitutions etc. and in the Decrees of the Councils, we find precepts concerning fasting. A detailed study of the development of the discipline in this period would reveal how the sacramental of fasting became a subject of thorough legislation and thereby lost its character of a voluntary, ascetical practice undertaken on one's own initiative.

### 7. Fasting an aid to Spiritual Life

There are many who condemn the practice of fasting and think that the strenuous conditions of modern living make this discipline practically impossible and that the use of frequent and light meals has in any case, become a part of our life style in modern society. It is also possible to find people who think that religious perfection has nothing to do with such trivial practices as fasting and abstinence. All these views seem to ignore the value of long standing religious tradition about fasting. Ascetical fast practised with prudence and moderation can and should always be an aid to spiritual life. It may be true that the modern conditions of life make fasting difficult. Religious thinkers<sup>61</sup> recognize the factors governing modern living and support a plan of simplifying the present disciplines of fasting in the religious traditions; even so provisions should be made in the law-books requiring the performance of voluntary acts of self-denial on fast-days.

In the early Church the act of fasting went hand in hand with the practice of charity and helping the poor. Without the acts of charity fasting was not considered to be perfect. The money saved by fasting had to be given to the poor and the needy.<sup>62</sup> Quoting numerous texts from the early Fathers of the Church, S. Lyonnet S.J. demonstrates that fasting was a source of charity in the ancient Church.<sup>63</sup> This aspect of fasting has always been supported by the Church. Quoting passages from documents beginning with *Didache*, and com-

61. R.F. McNamara, *Fast and Abstinence in Modern View*, Homiletic and Pastoral Review, vol. 65, no. 3 (New York: 1964), pp. 219-221.

62. Cf Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, vol. IX, Halae 1729, pp 216-217.

63. Cf S. Lyonnet, *De Jejunio et Abstinencia ut Fontibus Caritatis*, Verbum Domini, vol. 30 (Romae: 1952), pp. 92-100.

ing right up to recent times, A. Guillaume demonstrates that this has always been the teaching and practice of the Church.<sup>64</sup> The aspect of charity in fasting, however, seems to have been neglected in our own times. To revive that aspect of fasting would be very meaningful in this age of great social consciousness of the injustice of inequality.

## II

### 8. Fasting in Hinduism

Like Christianity Hinduism also recognizes the religious and ascetical significance of fasting.<sup>65</sup> Chief among the sacred books of Hinduism, the *Upanishads*<sup>66</sup> have spoken highly of fasting as a means of union with Brahman or the Absolute.<sup>67</sup> However, since a richer and more comprehensive treatment of the matter is to be found in the later *Dharmasastras* and *Grihyasutras*,<sup>68</sup> in this exposition we shall draw mainly on these.

#### i. *The Theology of Fasting*

It is not easy to state in what precisely the Hindu fast consists. P. V. Kane, in his *History of Dharmasastra* says, "Fasting strictly means total abstinence from food and drink, but generally it means *light diet restricted in quantity and also as regards the nature of the articles taken.*"<sup>69</sup> The *Taittiriya Samhita* refers to three ways of observing the *vrta* (vow) of fast on the days of 'darsapurnamasaisti (i.e on the New Moon and full Moon days). They consists in taking either only the

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64. Funk (ed). *Patres Apostolici*, vol. 1, p. 535.

65. No rigid distinction between fasting and abstinence, as it is now generally understood by Catholics, is to be expected in Hinduism, since eating meat was by law forbidden for all orthodox Hindus in normal circumstances of life.

66. The *Upanishads* belong to the classical Religious Scriptures of Hinduism and the date of their composition extends from 1300 to 600 B.C.

67. *Brihadarnyaka Upanishad*, IV, 4, 22.

68. The *Dharmasastras* and *Grihyasutras* constitute a vast compilation of the Hindu law, given by various law-givers. These laws dictate even the minutest rules to be observed by the Hindu in his domestic, religious and social life. The period of their compilation extends from the second century before Christ to the Gupta age or 647 A.D.

69. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. IV, (Poona: 1953), p. 52.

food available in the village, or the food available in the forest or in taking no food at all.<sup>70</sup> Some commentators on *Dharmasastras*, such as Devala, are of the opinion that a fast loses its efficacy, even by drinking water often or by chewing *tambula* (betel).<sup>71</sup> However, there is no general rule as to what and how much food could be taken on fast-days. The rule varies according to the different kinds of fast one is undertaking.<sup>72</sup>

Fasting is a means of *purification of the soul* from sin and its effects and of consequent *union of the soul with God*. Fasting has a negative and a positive aspect, constituting two different stages in the process of the soul's union with God. *The negative effects* of fasting is the purification of the soul from sin and its consequences. Fasting removes the guilt which man has incurred on committing sin and restores his moral integrity. Although fasting has also a juridical aspect, the moral aspect is more extensive and important.<sup>73</sup> It is this aspect that directly and immediately helps the soul's union with God. Hence fast is to be undertaken even if the sin is merely internal and not known to others. "A secret penance must be performed by him whose sin is not publicly known."<sup>74</sup> The *Vaishnava Dharmasastras* impose fasting as a penance even for resolving in one's mind to commit the sin of suicide. "A fast of three days (must be performed) for resolving to

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70. Cf *ibid.*

71. Cf *ibid.*; p. 53.

72. Mere abstinence from food is not a comprehensive concept of Hindu fasting. It is no isolated act of asceticism. Fasting has been looked upon as one among the several means of expiating sin and purifying man from the consequences of sin with which it has always been associated. The other important means for expiating sins are: public confession of sins, repentance, austerity, prayer, sacrifice, almsgiving, pilgrimage etc. Cf P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. IV, pp. 41-55.

73. The juridical aspect of the purificatory effect of fasting consists in making reparations for the external crimes. In this case fasting is a penalty imposed in the name of the society. Thus, for example, one who has killed a Brahmin liberates himself from his crime through a humiliating process of fasting: "He shall go to the villages, carrying a broken tray of metal of inferior quality: he may go to seven houses only, (crying), 'who will give alms to an *Abhisasta*? (one who kills a Brahmin); if he does not obtain anything (at seven houses) he must fast!'" *Apsatampa Dharmasastra*, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol 2, (Oxford: 1897), p. 80.

74. *Gauthama Dharmasastra*, XXIV. 1. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 2, p. 291.

die by one's own hand; if attempted, he must perform a *Krikkra* penance,<sup>75</sup> during twelve days with other austerities."<sup>76</sup>

*The positive effect* of fasting is the soul's union with God. By fasting man not only makes himself sacred by purifying the soul from sin and its consequences, but also, by making himself sacred, he comes into communion with God. The Hindu thought is replete with this concept of fasting. The positive aspect of fasting is sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of oneself to God. "The observance of Fast", says *Satapata Brahmana*, "is assuredly the head of the Sacrifice."<sup>77</sup> This sacrifice is a visible sign of man's self-gift and self-commitment to God." When (the sacrificer) enters on the fast, he thereby gives himself up to gods."<sup>78</sup> True religious knowledge imparted through fasting is but a natural consequence of this union with God, effected through the sacrifice implied in fasting. This is why every mystical process for God-realization in India, such as the Yoga methods of contemplation, enjoins fasting upon its followers.<sup>79</sup>

## ii. *Fasting and Prayer*

Fasting is generally accompanied by prayer, and the two supplement each other in producing the above-mentioned effects. "It has been declared in the Veda that a sinner becomes pure by reciting the *Samhita* of the Veda for twelve months or for twelve half months while fasting."<sup>80</sup> The efficacy of fasting with prayer is so great that by this means man becomes entirely free from sin. It is said that fasting together with the worship of Lord Vasudeva or Vishnu, purifies one from every sin.<sup>81</sup> Again, it is said that through prayer accompanied by fasting one can make oneself Brahman, i.e., the Absolute. "If fasting, he recites the *Samhita* one thousand (times) he becomes one with Brahman, resplendent like Brahman, (and) Brahman itself."<sup>82</sup>

75. *Krikkra* penance is a fast of 12 days. For the first three days one should not eat anything in the evening; then for three more days nothing in the morning; then for another three days one should live on food that is given unasked, and for the last three days one should not eat anything. Cf *Sacred Books of the East* vol. 2 (Oxford: 1897) pp. 87, 291-292.

76. Cf *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 14, (Oxford: 1900), pp. 199-200.

77. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 44, (Oxford: 1900), p. 240.

78. *Ibid.* p. 22.

79. Cf Vyasa, *Yoga Bhasya*, 2.32, edited by Swami Balarama in *Yogadarsanam* (Calcutta 1890).

80. *Vasista Dharmasastra*, IV. 32.

81. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 7 (Oxford: 1880), p. 268.

82. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 14 (Oxford: 1900), p. 309.

iii. *Other aspects of Fasting*

There are various *modes of fasting*, depending on the quantity or quality of food allowed, the duration of the fast and the other exercises of austerity to be added to the fast etc. We have already mentioned the *Krikkra* penance.<sup>83</sup> Another fast called *aptakrikkra* penance consists in using only hot water for three days, hot clarified butter for another three days, hot milk on the following three days, and nothing at all on the last three days.<sup>84</sup> There are many other modes, too numerous to be enumerated here. These different modes are used on different occasions of fasting prescribed by the law.

The occasions for fasting are also many. We shall indicate below a few of them. 1) *Transgression of law*: Sin, external or internal, has to be expiated by fasting. According to the different categories of sins, there are also different fasts. 2) *Marriage*: Fasting and Sacrifice is prescribed in connection with the celebration of a marriage.<sup>85</sup> 3) *Initiation*: Ceremonies of initiation into certain stages or states on life or forms of worship also include fasting. Thus on entering the order of ascetics one has to fast.<sup>86</sup> Fasting is prescribed for students.<sup>87</sup> The head of the family while learning the prayer for sacrifice has to fast.<sup>88</sup> 4) *Blessing*: Fasting is also prescribed for the ceremonies for obtaining the grant of special wishes.<sup>89</sup> 5) *Death*: At the death of one's wife or of the chief Guru (master) fasting is to be observed from the time of their death until the same hour on the following day.<sup>90</sup> 6) *Monthly Fasts*: A Brahmin has to offer sacrifice two times a month at *Full Moon and New Moon*. The day preceding such sacrifices is spent by the Brahmin and his wife in fasting and sexual abstinence. Fasting is to be observed on the tenth, eleventh and twelfth days of each lunar month together with a vow called *ekadasi vrata*. On the tenth and the twelfth days one meal is allowed; on the eleventh

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83. Cf *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 7 (Oxford:1880) p. 150.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*, vol. 29 (Oxford:1880), p. 172.

86. *Ibid.*, vol. 30 (Oxford: 1892), p. 274.

87. *Ibid.*, vol. 30 (Oxford: 1892), p. 74.

88. *Ibid.*, vol. 14 (Oxford: 1900), p. 105.

89. *Ibid.*, vol. 29 (Oxford: 1886) p. 425.

90. *Ibid.*, vol. 2 (Oxford: 1897), p. 137.



day called *ekadasi* no meal is permitted.<sup>91</sup> 7) *Annual Fasts*: According to the laws of Manu a Brahmin must perform once a year a *Krikkra* penance (for twelve days) in order to atone for having unintentionally eaten forbidden food.<sup>92</sup> Other annual fasts are *Sivaratri*, the feast of Siva, the anniversaries of the ten *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu etc. The anniversary of the death of one's father and mother, and many other days during the year, are also fast days.<sup>93</sup>

According to the *Dharmasastras* the rules of fasting are to be observed so strictly that a relaxation is only very rarely granted. A general rule for concession is found in the *Vaishnava Dharmasastras*: "An old man, who has passed his 80th year, a youth under the age of 16, women and sick persons have to perform only half of every penance."<sup>94</sup> One is exempted from the law of fasting while one is on a journey. But during that time, his son, brother, wife or pupil has to offer "*bali*" or oblation for him.<sup>95</sup>

### 9. A comparison with Christian Fasting

The idea of fasting is fundamentally the same both in Christianity and in Hinduism. Both consider it an effective means for the purification of the soul and for exempting from the consequence of sin and for the consequent union with God. This similarity is found also with regard to the occasions of fasting. In both religions fasting is practised mainly in connection with the commemoration and celebration of supernatural mysteries. As for the details in the way of observing fast, which in fact are only of relative importance, there is a difference. In this respect the Hindu discipline which does not make a distinction between fast and abstinence, is more akin to the oriental system.

One thing that we have to note in the Indian custom of fasting is the stress laid on the *ascetical aspect* of it. In both systems fasting has an ascetical and a juridical aspect. In Christianity, and especially in the West, due to the juridical nature of the Roman culture the latter aspect was emphasised. Consequent on the over-emphasis on

91. Cf Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners and Ceremonies*, (translated by H. K. Beauchamp), (Oxford: 1906), p. 270.

92. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25, (Oxford: 1886), p. 172

93. Abbe Dubois, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-271

94. *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 7, (Oxford 1880), p. 180.

95. *Ibid.*, vol. 29, (Oxford: 1886), p. 90.

the juridical aspect which led to subtle and unnecessary speculations about the quality and quantity of the fast-meals and about the seriousness and gravity of the obligation of fasting etc., the ascetical aspect with its ideas of sacrifice and self-dedication to God and the consequent union with Him was gradually forgotten. Gradually the nature of the necessity for fasting became more juridical than ascetical. Bereft of an internal urge the law of fast had to be imposed along with other sanctions, such as grave obligation and sin. The juridical aspect of the Hindu fasting, which was protested by social sanctions, has lost much of its force due to the changes in the social structure of the country. But the ascetical aspect, replete with the idea of sacrifice and dedication and union with God, still remains in the Indian religious consciousness. Centuries of western training has made the Christians of Malabar an exception to this general rule. The more they are trained in the western ways the more they adhere to the juridical aspect of the discipline rather than to its ascetical aspect. An example of this could be noted in the use of the dispensations granted by the Roman See with regard to fasting. One finds among the senior members of the laity a good number who still keep to the ancient and stricter discipline of fasting, while, as a matter of fact most members of the clergy make use of all the concessions allowed in the dispensation.

It will be quite meaningless to restore the ancient rigour of fasting in its original form in the context of any religious awakening. The long, frequent and severe fasts of old would be too much for today. The discipline in this regard must be adapted to the needs of the times. What one has to retain from the ancient discipline, from a religious point of view, is not so much the material elements as the spirit in which they were observed. Particular days and modes of fasting have only relative importance and, as such, are readjustable. But the spirit which made fasting a real help to spiritual life and an occasion for the renovation of spiritual life needs to be retained. The main element of the Hindu fasting that is likely to attract the attention of a believer in another religion is its stress on the ascetical aspect, namely, its ideas of self-gift to God and union with him. Fasting undertaken in this spirit goes beyond the juridical attitude and approach which makes one observe fasting for fear of punishment or sin. Many religious reformers of our times have attempted to correct this attitude and to replace it in the love of God and the desire for self-improvement.