

**MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF  
FASTING IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE  
A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM<sup>1</sup>**

**DR. MOHAMMAD AKRAM**

Department of Comparative Religion,  
International Islamic University,  
Islamabad, Pakistan

e-mail: Mohammad Akram <m.akram@iiu.edu.pk>

Though the ritual of fasting is common to most of the known religious traditions, its practice and symbolic value may vary considerably. This paper aims at a comparative study into meaning and significance of this ritual with special reference to the three Semitic religions namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some interesting similarities and dissimilarities in this connection are noted. It is discerned that quite often fasting is observed in these religions to commemorate certain events of religious significance during specific days of the year. Moreover, feasts and festivals which occur before or after various fasting periods in the selected religious traditions remind us of the social significance of this ritual. However, sometimes fasting also signifies spontaneous individual expression of thankfulness to, or repentance before God. It is observed that fasting in these religions is envisioned to facilitate self-control, invoke mercy and sympathy for others, create the sense of bondage, establish and assert religious identities, and release the negative feelings like guilt consciousness. In the final analysis, it is maintained that as a form of asceticism fasting does not necessarily imply negation of body or society. Rather, by facilitating self-control and freedom from one's inner fears and other emotional weaknesses it can also lead to a deeper affirmation of the self and greater integration into the society.