

‘All believers can learn from the way Muslims observe Ramadan’

By Atle Hetland

Most Pakistanis are committed religious people. That we see clearly during Ramadan when Muslims of all walks of life observe the fast, from early morning till Iftar at about 7:30 in the evening, and it is not easy for people whose work is demanding either they work outdoors, indoor in office or shops, or as housewives with young children. On top of it, the strong believers say it is not difficult. “No, we are used to it, and it is actually good to fast”, a group of workers in a photocopy shop said proudly.

“Working hours are the same for the staff during Ramadan as the rest of the year”, says Naseer, one of the young men in the large Al Fatah grocery and utility store in the sparkling Centaurus Mall in Islamabad. “I am not fasting today because I am not well”, he adds, sitting behind the cash machine.

Another young man, who is a Christian, is also not fasting, but says he observes the Christian fasting period called *Lent* in February and March, leading up to Easter. “But we are not as strict about it as Muslims are”, he adds, mentioning that he belongs to a young Pentecostal Church in the G7 sector of the city.

“At Al Fatah, there are a dozen or so Christian men and women at Al Fatah, but most of the 200 staff members are Muslims”, says Jawad Tayab, the assistant manager. “I don’t think we really notice what religion staff members belong to, perhaps until Ramadan”, he says.

“We are just glad to have a job in Al Fatah”, Asif Abbas says, explaining that the pay is relatively good, from about 15,000 rupees a month. “We work quite long hours, but in different shifts, with one hour break for lunch. During Ramadan we close for Iftar from 7 to 8:30.”

“The Al Fatah chain of supermarkets has four outlets in the country, in Lahore, where the owner Sheikh Irfan lives, and in Faisalabad and Islamabad”, Ammad Ali explains.

“It is a modern work place, and the slogan, ‘where generations stop to shop everyday’, is quite true”, smiles Asif Abbas, speaking excellent English.

“Muslims are true to the tradition of fasting”, says Father Rahmat Michael Hakim, who is Rector of St. Joseph’s Cathedral Church in Rawalpindi and Vicar-General of the Diocese of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. “But Christians, too, have a similar tradition, yet, observed in different ways. It was stronger before. Today, many Christians have a liberal interpretation of sin and repentance”, he explains.

“In some Christian denominations, it is advised that the fast should last for forty days, but not on Sundays, and only one meal every twenty-four hours. People older than sixty are exempted.”

“Some abstain from all types of meat, eggs and fruit, while others allow white meat and fish. In some traditions, in addition to the more common forty-day fast during of Lent, it is also advised that one fasts every Friday throughout the year.”

“In the Eastern Orthodox Church, fasting is still common and quite strict, similar to the way Muslims observe fasting during Ramadan worldwide.”

“In many Christian groups, fasting is not observed at all, but the members are still strong believers. Yet, Lent is a special time and fasting is preached about since it leads up to Easter, the most important religious feast in the Church, along with Christmas. Easter is observed in commemoration of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and also because Jesus fasted for forty days before he started his three-year ministry. He fasted in the desert, withstanding the devil’s temptations and being visited by angels and gaining religious strength”, Father Hakim explains.

“Fasting both in Christianity and Islam is deeply religious. We seek God through prayers and quiet reflection. We should feel compassion with the poor and suffering, offer alms and pray, and do what we can to help the needy. In Islam this is underlined very clearly. It is also underlined in Christianity, and it is these things that are important, more than the physical abstention.”

“All believers can learn from Islam, not least the way the Muslims observe the holy month of Ramadan. I wish Christians, too, could pay more attention to old religious traditions because they may be important even in our modern and busy time. There was indeed a reason for why the Holy Books including fast as part of good and pious religious life. Many ordinary people are great believers, including, for example, the workers at Al Fatah store in Centaurus Mall”, Father Hakim says.

Photos attached:

Photo captions:

Photo 1 & 2: A group of workers at Al Fatah store in the Centaurus Mall in Islamabad.

Photo 3: Father Rahmat Michael Hakim, St Joseph’s Cathedral Church, Rawalpindi.

(-Photo by the writer)

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(If you will use two picture, the one of the workers could be large and the photo of Father Rahmat small.