

Harming Body as a Red Line for Islamic Fasting

Mahdi Ebrahimi^{1*}, Saeedeh Behrooznia²

1. Associate Professor. Department of Islamic Studies, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.

2. Ph.D. Candidate of TEFL. Islamic Azad University, Mashhad Branch, Iran.

ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Review Article

Article History:
Received: 12 Dec 2014
Accepted: 18 Dec 2014
Published: 20 Dec 2014

Keywords:
Fasting
Harmfulness
Ill-health
Medicine
Ramadan month

ABSTRACT

Background: Fasting is the Islamic worship of man in order to approach God. There is a direct relationship between fasting, abstaining from eating and drinking, and man's health as well as ill-health. Therefore, through fasting the religious and medical issues are interwoven with each other; so that man can maintain his physical health by performing a religious worship.

Findings: Medical propositions which are based on experience can prove what would be harmful or urgent for body to take. In contrast, religious propositions relying on the metaphysical world are set for all people in every place at every time. Fasting is a religious term and in medicine, it is merely dealt with abstaining from eating and drinking. The concept of harmfulness means making a defect or disorder in the system of body, the recognition of which is the responsibility of medicine and the decision about which is within the responsibility of man.

Conclusion: Medical science can determine the effects and consequences of thirst and hunger in the specific hours of the month of Ramadan. According to the religious perspective, it has been emphasized that fasting is for maintaining man's health, and the conditions in which there is the probability of harmfulness for man's health due to fasting, man shouldn't fast. As a result, medical science can determine the interval of fasting.

► Please cite this paper as:

Ebrahimi M, Behrooznia S. Harming Body as a Red Line for Islamic Fasting. *J Fasting Health*. 2014; 2(4):158-161.

Introduction

Muslims' fasting in the holy month of Ramadan is one of the most important manifestations of the Islamic worships in approaching God and it is considered as a great social glory. The holy Qur'an does not exclusively consider fasting for Muslims and mentions that it had also been obligatory for the other previous nations. "you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil)" (1). The goal of fasting is for man to reach the level of virtue which itself is achievable when man has sincerity in his actions. Justifying the obligation of fasting, Hazrat Fatemeh (peace be upon her), the daughter of Islam holy prophet, says: "God has obliged fasting to make man persistent in his sincerity" (2). In fasting, there is no room for 'hypocrisy' at all, since fasting does not have any external representations, and it is only man and God who know about it. Therefore, like any other worships, fasting is based on two main

premises: the first one is the intention for approaching God, and the second one is the specified external actions the important of which is abstaining from eating and drinking. Hence, through fasting not only can man achieve moral goals, but also he can benefit from its physical effects among which are maintaining health. Accordingly, it is said that fasting has a closer relationship with medical science. This fact has been confirmed by the Islam holy prophet's maxim saying that: "Fast in order to be healthy" (3). But regarding the religious orders, if man thinks that there would be a logical and considerable probability that fasting is harmful for his health; he should not fast and if he fasts deliberately, his fasting is void (4). Therefore, for performing the religious duty of fasting, many Muslims commonly at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan start to consult doctors to realize whether they are able to fast or not. According to religious orders, it is man himself who should become certain that

* *Corresponding author:* Mahdi Ebrahimi, Associate Professor. Department of Islamic Studies, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran. E-mail: Ebrahimim@mums.ac.ir

© 2014 *mums.ac.ir* All rights reserved.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

there is the probability of harmfulness to his health through fasting. So, the relationship between the doctor and the patient needs to be investigated more meticulously in order to gain full understanding of the different dimensions of it. Respectively, in this article we try to clarify the status of fasting and the concept of harmfulness and its relation with medical issues.

The Difference between Scientific and Religious Propositions

To understand the nature of the relationship between scientific and religious propositions, we have to become familiar with the way these two propositions are made. Scientific propositions are experiential; that is they tend to discover and express facts through the experience criterion. These propositions are usually based on a specific time, place and experience which are likely to be changed in other circumstances. The experiential changeability and logical uncertainty features of medical propositions would pave the way for discovering new facts. On the other hand, the religious language is not restricted with experience and it is beyond experience which paves the way for man to reach meta-physical facts. Consequently, religious propositions are beyond specific time, place and experience; so that it is not possible to evaluate them through scientific experience (5). Therefore, when a religion orders its followers to fast, the philosophical meaning of this religious proposition is that God has ordered a command by his endless power. But science is able to discover some facts regarding this command gradually; so that it can challenge the religious order by proving the harmfulness or urgency temporarily. Yet, science is likely to make mistakes and the scientific proposition can be changed in the future. So, the main source of proving harmfulness, urgency and taking medicine is medical science which reflects the important role that it plays in the decision made by religion followers to fast or not.

The Meaning of Fasting

Fasting is an Islamic worship which necessitates man to abstain from certain things from dawn to sunset to seek nearness to God. Muslims are also obliged to abstain from eating, drinking, engaging in sexual intercourse, masturbation,

false oath, slander and calumny to God, his prophets and Imams, inhaling thick dust, sinking the head in water, using non-solid substances such as suppository, and deliberate vomiting—the detailed discussion of them is stated in books of jurisprudence (6). There can be research about every point which is necessary to abstain from, but medical science has mainly dealt with studying eating and drinking aspect and whether they could be harmful for man's health or not.

The Meaning of Harmfulness

Harmfulness is a concept determined by public's recognition, but it has been dealt with through religious order; that is to say that when there involves considerable harmfulness to man, that religious order would be replaced by another one. The considerable harmfulness is the one whose damage is not naturally reversible. For example, when man fasts, he becomes rather weak, but after he breaks his fast, this weakness is almost gone, so fasting would not be considered harmful for his health. But, if man has to resort to some kind of treatment as a result of fasting, it becomes obvious that fasting can be harmful for his health; whether the effects of harmfulness are clear and there is a need for immediate treatment, or its effects are hidden and observed after some time. Therefore, in medical recommendations, both the doctor and the patient should take this point into consideration.

The Doctor and Patient Relationship

Regarding the recognition of harmfulness which challenges fasting, the doctor and patient's duties should be described clearly. Their duties are as follows:

- Doctors, according to their specialization, have to state the effects and consequences of thirst and hunger with regard to the month of the year in which Ramadan coincides, because as it was mentioned before, fasting is a religious concept entailing different parts, and the main aspect that doctors deal with is related to hunger and thirst.
- In religious orders, it has been stated that it is only man who is responsible for recognizing whether fasting is harmful for him or not, and the doctor's recognition would not be valid

(4). Nevertheless, some people misunderstand the meaning of this order. These people assume that since they have been assigned this responsibility, and the immediate consequences of illness are not observed through fasting, they ignore the doctor's recognition and fast with difficulty and afterwards they get into trouble. This interpretation of the religious order is not correct. The exact meaning of this order is that it is only man who should reach a definite conclusion or a considerable probability that fasting would be harmful for him perhaps through the doctor's recognition which is not alone regarded as a religious order. Consequently, there exist some cases in which due to the variability of the conditions or unknown effects of illness, the doctor himself assigns the responsibility to the patient to control these effects during fasting.

- One of the problems that patients can be confused about is the controversy among doctors about the harmfulness of fasting for the patient. To clarify this issue, some points should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the patient should trust the doctor regarding his observation of medical ethics, and also he should be certain that the doctor has not ignored his- the patient's- religious beliefs. Because, it is likely that the doctor is not a Muslim or does not believe in fasting, but regarding medical ethics, he should respect his patient's beliefs. Secondly, the relation between the illness and the doctor's specialization is very important. Considering the noticeable medical advances, there are some cases in which different specialists express their viewpoints about an illness. As each doctor views the issue within his own perspective, different conceptualizations are formed, but it is the patient who has to draw a conclusion with the doctor's help. Eventually, if he arrives at a conclusion that there would be strong likelihood of harmfulness, he should not fast. This is true with pregnant women and their period of lactation. Therefore, the patient should trust his doctor based on two reasons; one of which is with regard to medical ethics, and the other is with regard to

scientific specialization so that he can decide whether to fast or not.

Benefits of Fasting

Different scientists from different majors have dealt with the benefits of fasting as an important concept. The benefits of fasting are of two types: the first type is the ones which are achieved materially, disregarding the spiritual aspect of fasting, and the second type is the ones which are obtained through the intention of seeking nearness to God- the spiritual and psychological aspects of fasting. Many doctors admit the benefits of fasting which make them noticeable for healthy people. Generally, religious orders are dependent on the conditions at which they have been asserted. As such, when the holy Qur'an talks about certain foods, it does not necessarily mean that they would be beneficial for everybody (7). Besides, nobody can deny the benefits of abstaining from some of the things- apart from eating and drinking- such as smoking and the like which are prohibited in Ramadan. But, some benefits of fasting in Ramadan are due to the fact that since man has spent a longer period in worshipping God, his power to control his temptations increases. Actually, fasting is a kind of exercise to control temptations which leads to spiritual empowerment- the true meaning of virtue in the Islamic religion. On the other hand, many social disorders are decreased in Ramadan which draws the attention of sociologists. Therefore, we can come to this conclusion that the stronger people have true relationship with God, not only can they reach spiritual rewards, but also they obtain better daily social achievement. Accordingly, Islam has recommended that Muslims who are not able to fast avoid breaking their fasts openly in public during Ramadan, as it would reduce the positive social and psychological effects of fasting.

The Errors of Medical Science

One of the significant challenges in fasting is the time when a doctor according to his own recognition tells his patient that fasting would be harmful for his health, and later it becomes clear that it was mistakenly diagnosed, or when the present medical findings reveal that fasting would be harmful for the specific illness and

later on, the medical theories are reformed by discovering a new kind of medicine to resolve the probable effects of harmfulness. If so, what would the man's responsibility be in these conditions?

According to what has been mentioned, the answer to these questions is clear as the decision about the harmfulness of fasting is on the patient's shoulder. Thus, if man reaches a considerable probability that fasting would be harmful for his health, it is his duty that he does not fast and if there involves a mistake, as it is not his fault, he hasn't committed any sins. Certainly, when medical science achieves significant breakthroughs, there would not be any changes regarding the individual's responsibility; that is to say that man's responsibility is the same decision based on what has medical science prescribed for him in that specific condition, any way the issue is not changed. To put it differently, errors can occur in two ways: the first are the ones which are logical in the way that man chooses his scientific way correctly, but on his way, he makes some unintentional mistakes about which he has not committed any sins and according to religious jurisprudence, he is supposed to follow certain orders for each specific case. The second type of errors are the ones which man encounters due to choosing an illogical way, for example, when a person assumes that fasting would be harmful for him only through a wild guess; in this case his error is not acceptable and has to be compensated (4). Therefore, the probable medical errors would not make serious problems for assigning the responsibility for fasting.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned issues, the following points should be taken into consideration:

1. For understanding the relationship between religious and scientific issues, one should pay attention to their propositions and interpret each one within their own methodological framework.
2. Fasting is a religious concept, but harmfulness is a public concept; one should pay attention to their semantic boundaries.
3. Medical science can be the source for the recognition of harmfulness in the domain of

hunger, thirst, and other physical consequences for man, but it cannot claim for the religious concept of fasting.

4. Arriving at a conclusion and deciding about the harmfulness of fasting for man based on the medical diagnoses is within the responsibility of man himself.
5. One should not search for the benefits of fasting within medical domain, as fasting has vaster dimensions which are beyond medical science.
6. The probable medical errors which have not occurred deliberately would not assign responsibility for man.

References

1. The Holy Qur'an. Al-Baqara, verse: 183.
2. Ansari M, Rajaei, H. The mysteries of fadak. 1st ed. Tehran: Dalil-e Ma Publishers; 2001.
3. Mohammadi Reishahri M. Mizanol hekmat. 2nd ed. Tehran: Darol Hadith Publishers; 2000.
4. Khomeini, R. Resaleh elmieh. 2nd ed. Tehran: The Institute of Nashr va Tanzime Asare Imam Khomeini; 1999.
5. Ebrahimi M. Analyzing medical propositions in Islamic texts. *Teb va tazkieh* 2006;62-63:40
6. Tabatabaee Yazdi M. Alorvatol vothgha. 2nd ed. Beirut: M A'lami Lelmatboat Institute; 1988.
7. Ebrahimi M. Topical interpretation of the holy Qur'an. Qom: Nashr-e Ma'ref Office; 2011.
8. Makarem Shirazi N. Tafsir-e nemooneh. 28th ed. Tehran: Islamic Darol kotob Publishers; 1996.