

Month of fasting ahead as Ramadan approaches

Tomorrow is the first day of Ramadan – the holiest month in the Islamic calendar. For the next thirty days, Muslims everywhere will be spending time in fasting and reflection.



RELIGIOUS STUDIES

For nearly two billion people, Friday marks the start of the year's holiest month. It is the beginning of Ramadan – a time when Muslims everywhere explore and test their faith by fasting.

The traditions of Ramadan celebrate a crucial moment in the history of Islam. It was in this month, Muslims believe, that Muhammad was told he had been chosen as God's messenger, and the word of Allah was revealed to him, creating what we now know as the Quran – Islam's holy book.

According to the Quran, for the next 30 days 'the gates of paradise are opened, and the gates of hell are closed.' The month is a time of purity, blessed by Allah, in which good actions have a greater reward. Many Muslims will take the opportunity to give up bad habits, and make more effort to do good. Mosques open late for *Taraweeh* prayers. Often, people will strive to put more effort into their faith, by thinking about God, reading the Quran and donating to charity.



A Pakistani man hands out bread to the poor at the end of a day's fasting © Getty Images

Important as all this is, however, the most crucial element of Ramadan is the fast, or *Sawm*. For 30 days, many Muslims will let nothing pass their lips from sunrise until sunset. This year, that means waking up before dawn to stock up on fuel, then waiting until the sun sets to break fast, often in a celebratory meal with friends and family. It is a big challenge: even drinking water and chewing gum is forbidden.

Why take on such a testing trial? Taking on the *Sawm* means disciplining the body, focusing the mind and showing commitment to God. As many Islamic scholars point out, only Allah can know if an individual has *really* kept to his or her fast – making it a profound and personal test of faith.

In many Muslim countries, daily life during Ramadan is arranged around fasting. For Western Muslims, however, the demands of school and work, and the constant presence of temptation as

others munch on lunch and dinner, can make Ramadan much harder.

That's not all. This year, Ramadan falls as over 3000 Muslim athletes compete in the London Olympics. For many, that means making a tough decision: break the fast, or risk a crucial competitive disadvantage from hunger and thirst.

ABSOLUTE ASCETICISM?

Many athletes will go for the first option. They think the value of Ramadan lies more in personal commitment and belief than following the rules to the letter. Fasting is about discipline and faith in God: compared to these qualities, going hungry doesn't matter so much.

But for others, being fully committed to something means standing by it even when it is inconvenient. People of many religions feel rules like keeping kosher or observing the Sabbath are essential to religious devotion. They provide a structure for personal belief and understanding to flourish.

Q & A

Q What kind of events happen during Ramadan in the UK?

A Every night, prayers are held at mosques all over the country, and community centres and Islamic groups will also hold gatherings for the breaking of the fast.

Q How many Muslim athletes will be fasting?

A Some plan to, but many will choose not to fast during the Olympics and observe later in the year.

Q Will people from other religions face similar problems?

A In the past, some Christian athletes have struggled with competing on a Sunday, which is observed as a day of rest. In the 1924 Olympics, Eric Liddell refused to

compete in the 100m sprint because it fell on a Sunday. Instead, he trained for the 400m – and won gold.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Religious rules should be updated for the modern world.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

▶ Month of fasting ahead as Ramadan approaches

WORD WATCH

Muhammad – Muhammad is the most important prophet in the Islamic faith. Muslims believe that, during his life, the Angel Jibreel presented him with revelations from God, which became the Quran. Born in Mecca, in Saudi

Arabia, in the year 570, Muhammad spent his life preaching and is considered the founder of Islam.

Allah – In Arabic, the word Allah means ‘the God’. Although the word has been used to refer to the God of different religions, it is broadly the name of the god of Islam.

Many Muslims – There are some exceptions to the obligation to fast. Pregnant women, those who are ill or old and children are excluded. People also do not have to fast if they are employed in hard labour or travelling – caveats that could be beneficial for Olympic athletes.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you fast while competing at the Olympics if your religion required it?
2. Do you think going hungry for a month teaches any useful lessons or skills? If so, what?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design the ideal meal for breaking a day long fast.
2. Why are rules important in religion? Choose and research any rule from any religion, then explain the rule to your class – what is involved and why it matters.

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 **NOTES**

