

Comparing the Teachings of Fasting in Christianity and Islam: A Reflective Comparison

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<p>Riwayat Jurnal</p> <p>Artikel diterima: 21 Juni 2022</p> <p>Artikel direvisi: 16 Nopember 2022</p> <p>Artikel disetujui: 12 Desember 2022</p>	
<p>Kata Kunci:</p> <p>Ajaran Agama, Berpuasa, Berpantang, Kristen, Islam.</p>	<p>Abstrak</p> <p>Puasa merupakan salah satu ritual/ibadah keagamaan yang dapat ditemukan di hampir setiap tradisi keagamaan, termasuk tradisi keagamaan Kristen dan Islam. Beberapa peneliti studi agama, melalui berbagai penelitian mereka, mengklaim bahwa puasa dilakukan ribuan tahun yang lalu oleh berbagai penganut agama di dunia dan bertahan hingga hari ini. Studi ini mencoba mendeskripsikan ajaran dan praktik puasa dalam agama Kristen dan Islam, kemudian memberikan analisis persamaan dan perbedaan penerapan ajaran tersebut dalam konteks Indonesia. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kepustakaan dalam arti penelitian ini akan mengandalkan buku-buku dan jurnal-jurnal ilmiah yang berkaitan dengan topik tersebut sebagai sumber data primer. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa amalan puasa dalam agama Kristen dan Islam masing-masing memiliki makna, keunikan, dan ciri khasnya masing-masing. Misalnya, mereka memiliki makna tentang tujuan puasa, dalil-dalil yang mereka gunakan untuk berpuasa, jenis-jenis puasa, dan tata caranya. Lebih lanjut, studi ini berargumen bahwa ajaran agama, baik Kristen maupun Islam, bersifat dinamis, multitafsir, dan kontekstual.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <p><i>Religious Teaching, Fasting, Abstinence, Christianity, Islam.</i></p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p><i>Fasting is one of the religious practices or rituals/worship found in almost every religious tradition, including the Christian and Islamic religious traditions. Several scholars of religious studies, through various research, claim that fasting was practiced thousands of years ago by various religious adherents in the world and persists to this day. This study attempts to describe the teachings and practices of fasting in Christianity and Islam and then provides an analysis of the similarities and differences in implementing these teachings in the context of Indonesia. This study is library research in the sense that this study will rely on books and scientific journals related to this topic as primary data</i></p>

	<p><i>sources. This study found that the practice of fasting in Christianity and Islam each has its meaning, uniqueness, and characteristics. For example, they have their meaning about the purpose of fasting, the arguments they use for fasting, the types of fasting, and the procedures. Furthermore, this study argues that religious teachings, both Christianity and Islam, are dynamic, multi-interpretative, and contextual.</i></p>
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Introduction

Religion is an important aspect of human life. We cannot fully understand humans without understanding their religion, and we cannot understand religion without considering socio-economic-cultural aspects (Smart, 1996) because religion involves all aspects of human life. This is seen in the way religion is understood and practiced. For example, religion regulates the way of human life, both related to God and related to fellow humans, even related to the universe (Nasr, 2008; Woodhead, 2005). Therefore, religion is often referred to as a way of life for religious human beings, which is something noble that can lead them to the right path.

One of the teachings or rituals or worship performed by religious people as one of the noble paths is fasting. Fasting has been practiced for thousands of years. Almost all religious traditions and beliefs have a concept and practice of fasting, and this concept and practice still persist until this day. In general, fasting is an act or attitude of avoiding eating, drinking, and all things that satisfy psychological and physical desires within a certain period. In Christianity and Islam, the notion of fasting has similarities in that fasting is an attitude of avoiding/refraining from all or only certain types of food/drink (Gulevich, 2001). In short, fasting is a spiritual practice carried out to improve the quality of one's faith, or the quality of one's spirituality, because, by fasting, the person takes good control of the things (desire, etc.) that can keep them from glory.

Although fasting is a spiritual thing, however, fasting is not only done for spiritual-theological purposes but also mostly done for psychic, physical, and social purposes. Various studies have been carried out in this framework (Qardhawi, 2008; Umaroh, 2017), namely the practice of fasting in the framework of mental and physical health (Siregar, 2022). Fasting also does not always mean purely religious teachings, which means only theological ones, because fasting is a socio-cultural practice that also cannot be separated from history. For example, in

various pieces of literature, it is stated that fasting has been practiced from time immemorial, that Christianity inherited its fasting traditions from Judaism (*Bradshaw & Johnson, 2011*), and Islam inherited fasting from earlier traditions. However, there are always characteristics and reinterpretations. That is what will be seen in this study.

In short, fasting can be understood as an attitude of abstinence or refraining from various types of food and drink or all eating and drinking activities. In a Christian sense, fasting can be an attitude of completely or partially abstaining from any kind of food. However, in some sects of Christianity, fasting means an attitude of abstinence from certain types of food, such as certain meat products (Rhodes, 2015). The types of food that are abstained also vary from one Christian sect to another. All the rules of fasting depend on the interpretation of the teachings of fasting in the Bible, depending on customs, traditions, and ecclesiastical law. In Christianity, there is a plurality of interpretations of the teachings of fasting, some interpret it as merely abstaining and controlling themselves from everything they like, and some interpret that they cannot eat certain foods (Clancy et al., 2002).

While, this research focuses on the comparative teaching of fasting in Christian and Islamic teachings in its various aspects. To close the gap in previous studies as described above, this research will explain how fasting in Christianity is theoretically and practically as well as how fasting in Islam is theoretically and practically too. Thus, this article will start by exploring the teachings of fasting in Christianity first and then move on to the teachings of fasting in Islam and compare the two.

As we can see on the brief description above, the concept of fasting in these two religions, Christianity and Islam, basically have similarities and differences. Both have essentially the same meaning but, in practice, have differences. This prompted me to further examine the issue of fasting in Christianity and Islam. There are several questions that I will try to answer in this study, including, (1) what is the meaning and law of fasting in Christianity and Islam?; (2) what is the purpose and wisdom of fasting in Christianity and Islam; (3) as well as reflective and critical responses to the teachings of fasting from the two religions.

Research Methodology

This type of research is library research. That means that this study relies on books, journals, or texts related to the topic of fasting teachings. If a study relies on texts as the main source of research data, it is referred to as library research (Nazir, 2003; Sugiyono, 2013). The approaches in this research are textual and phenomenological. The textual approach is used to see how religious texts become legitimacy for the practice of fasting. Meanwhile, a phenomenological approach is used to understand how religious adherents, both Christians and Muslims, practice the teachings of fasting in their respective lives (*Blaikie, 2005; Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Neuman, 2014*).

Because this type of research is library research, the main sources of research data are from the Bible and books on the main teachings of the two religions studied, while the secondary sources of research data are scientific articles on the teachings of fasting and various relevant writings. Then, the data collection technique used is the documentary technique. The documentary technique collects data from written documents such as books, articles, news archives, and others related to research problems (Babbie, 2014; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Booth et al., 2008; King et al., 1994). After the data is collected from these various sources, then it is analyzed to answer research questions. The analysis procedure is textual and practical interpretation (*Creswell & Poth, 2017; Dey, 2005*) to see the various sides of the teaching of fasting in these two religions.

Literature Review

To give an idea of fasting in Christianity and Islam, I gathered some previous research related to this topic. First, research was conducted by Mahmud Muhsinin on the meaning of fasting according to Islam and Catholicism (Muhsinin, 2015). This study found that fasting in Islam and Catholicism has something in common: they both refrain. This study also shows that in Islam, fasting is a form of gratitude to God for giving so many blessings and gifts in life. In addition, fasting also means a sense of social togetherness in carrying out rituals and also as a health effort. Whereas in Catholicism, fasting means an effort to repent, self-denial, and an effort to unite oneself with God. Furthermore, in this study, Mushinin emphasized that in Catholicism, there are various functions of fasting, such as expelling demons, fasting for peace, improving health conditions, getting closer to God, and helping fellow humans who are in poor and poor conditions. The drawback of this research is that Mushinin only focuses on

Catholicism and does not see the teachings of fasting in the wider Christian realm. This shortcoming is what I cover in my study.

Furthermore, related to the topic of fasting and self-health. Harianto examines the meaning of fasting rituals or fasting theology from health, psychological and spiritual perspectives (Harianto, 2021). By involving qualitative research methods and literature studies, Harianto found that (1) from a health perspective, fasting means an effort and awareness of a person to maintain a healthy body and avoid all diseases. Because, from a health perspective, fasting is very beneficial for the body. Meanwhile, (2) from a psychological perspective, fasting means an effort made by fasting people to train themselves to control themselves from all situations or immediate matters so that they can deal with all matters and situations wisely. Then (3), in a spiritual perspective, fasting means an effort to train oneself to always live according to God's commands and focus on devotion to God alone. In a spiritual sense, people who fast never stop establishing a relationship with God by fasting, usually accompanied by the ritual of praying and reading the Bible. In this study, Harianto also found that there needs to be a theological formulation of "Fasting" that can provide a holistic interpretation of fasting rituals, such as involving the three approaches simultaneously, namely the health, psychological and spiritual approaches.

Past research on the topic of fasting is not always related to theological doctrine but can also be group-based or specific case studies. This can be seen in the research conducted by Ramadani on the meaning of fasting among Muslim and Christian prisoners in Tangerang (Ramadani, 2008). This study aims to examine the convicts, people who are serving sentences for violating the regulations set by the state, which are found in Tangerang prisons with observation and interview methods. This study found that prisoners' understanding of fasting among Muslims and Christians differed. For example, prisoners from Islam think that fasting is a divine command that must be done, while prisoners from Christianity think that fasting is an effort to get closer to the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, this study also shows that there are differences in the implementation of fasting, especially in prison and outside prison. The drawback of this research is that the comparison does not look further into the theological realm, and this deficiency will be addressed in this study.

In the context of Christianity, there are attempts to reject fasting. This became the basis for Esron Mangatar Siregar to conduct research on the principles of fasting according to Joel 2:12-17, especially for today's Christianity (Siregar, 2022). By using qualitative research methods and descriptive analysis through literature studies, specifically the text of the Book of Joel 2:12-17, Siregar found that Joel 2:12-17 calls for fasting with several principles. First, follow the word of God because God is merciful and merciful; God is long-suffering and abundant in faithfulness. Second, turn to God with all your heart, cry and moan. Third, tear the heart, and Fourth, humble oneself (Siregar, 2022). In short, with these four principles, there is a restoration of the relationship between man and God and a focus on God's will.

Finally, a comparative study was also conducted by Intan Nurfadillah to examine the comparison of fasting in Islam and Catholicism (Nurfadillah, 2021). This study uses a library research approach, which uses literature such as the Qur'an, Al-Hadith, and the Bible, books, journals, and articles on the internet. This study found that there are fundamental similarities between the two religions in fasting rituals. Both emphasize the wisdom of fasting; for example, in Islam, fasting has wisdom as a cleansing of the soul, a way to obey God's commands and stay away from God's prohibitions, in this case, God's commands to refrain from lustful impulses. The same thing can also be found in Catholicism, that fasting has wisdom as an effort to control oneself from bodily desires. However, in my opinion, this research is still not comprehensive in examining fasting; therefore, further research is needed.

In short, this research focuses on the comparative teaching of fasting in Christianity and Islam in its various aspects. To close the gap in previous studies as described above, this research will explain how fasting in Christianity is theoretically and practically as well as how fasting in Islam is theoretically and practically too. Thus, this article will start by exploring the fasting in Christianity first and then move on to the fasting in Islam and compare the two.

Findings and Discussion

1. Fasting in Christianity

In Christianity, fasting means not eating or not drinking for a certain time, as stated in the Bible Esth 4:16. That is, fasting in Christianity is done at a certain time. In the Old Testament, fasting is mentioned with the words "*tsum*," "*tsom*," and "*inna nafsyo*," which means "to humble oneself by fasting" (Clancy et al., 2002). Fasting in the Old Testament is also

associated with self-affliction, mourning, personal and public penance, and reinforcement of supplicatory prayer. Several examples of fasting are mentioned in the Old Testament: (1) Moses, when waiting for the theophany, fasted for forty days (Ex. 24:18); (2) Elijah followed the example of Moses (1 Kings 19:8); (3), Daniel waited for the answer to his prayer by fasting (Dan. 9:3). In early Christianity, there was no formalized version of fasting, it was an individual matter, but in the 2nd century, the practice of fasting was later institutionalized (Epafras, 2020).

Then the early Christians established regular weekly fast days, they fasted on Friday to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus, and Wednesday, to commemorate his betrayal. In this context, fasting cultivates repentance, deepens prayer, and identifies with Christ's suffering and sacrifice. Then later in the fourth century, many Christians adopted the practice of fasting before receiving Holy Communion (*Perdew, 2021; Wolff & von Sinner, 2020*).

In the Christian tradition, fasting is mostly done at Easter. Regarding the fasting procedure, we cannot separate it from the context of Easter. Initially, fasting was only done for thirty-six days or six days x six weeks. But in the seventh and eighth centuries, Christian leaders throughout Western Europe began adding another four days to 40 days. Christians began Lent on the Wednesday following the seventh Sunday before Easter, a day which became known as Ash Wednesday. The Lenten fast ended with the late-night Easter Vigil service on Holy Saturday. That is why the fast in Christianity is observed for the 40 days of Lent (*Alfian, 2022; Crehan, 1974; Epafras, 2020; Prutskova, 2018*).

Whereas in the new covenant, fasting is mentioned with the word "*nesteo*" or "*nesteia*," which means "not eating." Fasting in Christianity is carried out for various purposes (*Ariyanto et al., 2012*), for example, as a preparation to receive God's word (Exodus 34:28, Daniel 9:3), as a sign of repentance (1 Kings 21:27), as a sign of repentance, a sign of mourning (1 Samuel 31:13) and as a request for God's blessing (2 Samuel 12:16). There are several arguments used by Christians to justify the practice of fasting in the New Testament, including Jesus encouraged personal fasting and practicing it "in secret" (Matt. 6:6, 17-18), away from public visibility, and Jesus commenced his ministry with forty days of fasting (Matt. 4:1-11), following the typology of Mose (*Alfian, 2022*).

In Christianity, there are various interpretations of the practice of fasting. For Catholics, fasting is a sign of repentance, a sign of self-denial, and a sign that we unite our sacrifice with

the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross. During Lent, fasting is always followed by prayers and acts of abstinence. As for seventh-day Adventist Christians, fasting is done for (1) preparing for ministry; (2) when in need of spiritual power; (3) when the church faces a crisis; (4) when faced with trials, problems, dangers, or threats; (5) for the forgiveness of sins (Gulevich, 2001; Wauran, 2013). Meanwhile, among Protestants, most of them do not fast, even though there are verses in the Bible that explicitly recommend fasting. They believe that the Lord Jesus has fasted for his followers, as in Matthew 9:16-17, Mark 2:18-22, and Luke 5:33-39 (Douglas, 2008; Franklin, 2009; Muhsinin, 2015)

Within the Christian tradition itself, there is a diversity of fasting practices. For example, in Catholicism, fasting is done by “eating once a day when full.” That is, when someone chooses to fast, they can choose to eat anytime but only once a day. After that, they are not allowed (Azize, 2014). Whereas in Protestantism, there is diversity as well. Some fast as in Catholicism, and some fast only by “abstinence.” There are also those who only abstain from eating certain foods such as meat and so on. In short, in Christianity, fasting is the law of the church. Therefore, it is based on the direction of the church according to the context in which it is located and originates. That’s what causes fasting in Christianity to vary in practice.

Despite practicing religion, Christians still have the same meaning: fasting is a means to reach a higher spiritual level. As Gulevich emphasizes:

“Although Christians may differ in their fasting methods, all agree that fasting should be practiced to achieve a spiritual goal. Christians generally view Lenten fasting as an aid to mindfulness, that is, as a tool that keeps one’s attention from wandering. Many also view it as a means of disciplining the body, thereby freeing the soul to attend to matters of the spirit” (Gulevich, 2001, p. 201).

In short, the traditions of Fasting and Abstinence in Christianity were inspired by biblical patterns, Early Judaism, and in contact with the philosophical beliefs and traditions of early Christianity. Then change-adapt-developed in such a way until the time of Protestantism. Where Protestantism is, there are many features of the practice of fasting. Most practice fasting as part of a personal spiritual quest and not communally. However, among Indonesian Protestants, there has been a new movement to fast as part of the Christian revival of calendars and liturgical rituals. But basically, the understanding of Christians towards fasting is an act of abstinence.

2. Fasting in Islam

In Islam, fasting means refraining from everything, not only from eating and drinking but also from behaviors and actions that are not recommended. When people fast, not only do they not eat and drink, but they also refrain from doing things that contain lust and refrain from speaking without benefit, such as gossiping, lying, and so on. In the Holy Quran and Hadith, fasting is referred to as “*ash-shiyam*” or “*ash-shaum*,” which means “to refrain from something” (Zuhdi & Sumanji, 2008). In addition, fasting can also mean “*tarkun wa kaffun wa hirmanun*,” which means to leave, refrain, or prohibit. It can also mean “*imsak*,” which means self-restraint, and “*imtina'un*,” which means “prevent.” In short, fasting means refraining from things like eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, and other things from sunrise to sunset. Fasting is done to get closer to God, known as “*taqarub ilallahi*” (Wijayanti, 2010).

Before Islam came, fasting among Arabs had been done. The difference is that their fasting has no rules, just refraining from eating and drinking as long as they can afford it (A.H., 1975; Khan et al., 2016). This practice of fasting tends to be excessive. People who fast when they are physically weak can't do anything (Almulhem et al., 2020; Hossain, 2012). Therefore, after the prophet Muhammad came, fasting was given a limit so as not to be excessive. The limit is from sunrise to sunset (Sakr, 1975). Thus, fasting itself has its portion. Since fasting has been given a time limit, the meaning of fasting in Islam has changed to “refrain from everything that invalidates the fast from dawn to sunset (Azizi, 2010; Ismail et al., 2019; Mohamed Pakkir Maideen et al., 2017; Pakkir Maideen et al., 2017; Pourabbasi et al., 2019).

One of the influential thinkers in Islam, Al-Ghazali, formulated three categorizations of fasting in Islam. First is general fasting, namely refraining from eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. Second, special fasting, which is not only refraining from eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse but also refraining from bad words, views, visions, and bodily actions. Third, special al-special fasting, which is in addition to carrying out the two previous types of fasting, coupled with heart fasting, namely refraining from thinking, fantasizing, or imagining low worldly things during fasting (Nurfadillah, 2021). Meanwhile, another thinker named Yusuf al-Qardawi explained that fasting is to restrain and prevent the will to eat, drink, or have intercourse with the wife to submit and get closer to God (Umaroh, 2017).

There are several reasons why Muslims fast, for example, in the Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah: 183. The verse reads: "O you who believe. Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you so that you become pious" (Kementerian Agama RI, 2010). Although fasting for Muslims is obligatory, certain conditions are not obligatory. For example, the Qur'an explains that people who are sick and/or traveling may not fast. However, if the type of fasting that is missed is the obligatory fast, fasting the month of Ramadan, then he must replace it with another fast on another day. In addition, women who are pregnant and breastfeeding may not fast. They can replace it by paying "*fidyah*," which means feeding the poor.

In Islam, there are several kinds of fasting, including (1) obligatory fasting, namely fasting that must be carried out by everyone whose time has been determined, namely the month of Ramadan; (2) Ramadan "*qada*" fasting, namely fasting that is done to replace fasting that is not carried out in the month of Ramadan; (3) votive fasting, namely fasting that is obligatory when promised to do so; and (4) sunnah fasting, fasting that is not mandatory, such as fasting Monday-Thursday, fasting Arafah, and others (Mustafit, 2004). All types of fasting are done in more or less the same way. That is, refrain from eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, and things that break the fast from sunrise to sunset.

In Islam, fasting aims to get a person closer to God as a form of repentance for the sins committed and to keep someone away from the torments of hell fire when someone dies. In the holy book of Muslims, namely the Qur'an, it is well explained about the purpose of fasting, namely to achieve piety: "fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for you to fast as it was prescribed for those before you so that you become pious" (QS. Al-Baqarah: 183)" (Kementerian Agama RI, 2010). The lessons of fasting are several, including: (1) fasting as a cleansing of the soul or "*tazkiyat al-nafs*"; (2) fasting to maintain health; (3) fasting as a process for self-education; (4) fasting to control oneself from bad deeds; (5) fasting as a medium for social relations, especially during the month of Ramadan; (6) and fasting as a way to achieve the level of piety for mankind (Qardhawi, 2008). The purpose and wisdom of fasting involve many physical-psychological and spiritual things.

3. A Brief Reflection on the Teachings of Fasting in Christianity and Islam

I will keep this section short. I have elaborated on the discussion of the teachings of fasting for these two religions, Christianity and Islam, in the previous section, and in this section, I will focus on a comparative reflection on the teachings of fasting in the two religions.

Christianity and Islam have their interpretation of the teachings of fasting, both practical and doctrinal-abstract meanings. At a practical level, fasting in Islam is an attempt to prevent oneself from anything that breaks the fast, be it eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset, whereas, in Christianity, fasting is an attempt to refrain from eating for 24 hours after one full meal which time this meal can be chosen (morning, afternoon, or evening).

Although they are practically different, fasting in Christianity and Islam has the same meaning. In Islam, fasting means cleansing the soul by obeying what is ordered and staying away from what God has forbidden. In this context, God forbids humans to indulge their desires. Likewise in Christianity, fasting is interpreted as a ritual performed to control bodily desires. Furthermore, these two religions also interpret fasting in a broader scope, namely in the social sphere. These two religions interpret fasting as a form of solidarity with the lower classes by participating in enduring hunger and giving social donations to those in need.

Apart from these fundamental similarities, there are also differences in the practice of fasting in Christianity and Islam. In Christianity, there is no strict verse that states that Christians must fast, whereas, in Islam, there are strict instructions in the Qur'an and Hadith that Muslims are obliged to perform fasting for both women and men who have reached puberty. In Christianity, especially in Catholicism, fasting is observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstinence is observed on Fridays during Lent. Christians, especially Catholics, provide age limits for adherents in fasting and abstinence and there is an exemption for those who are unable. Another difference lies in the purpose of fasting practiced by Christians and Muslims. In Islam, fasting is done to achieve piety while in Christianity, the main purpose of fasting is to participate and take part in the suffering of Jesus on the cross for the salvation of mankind in the world.

Conclusion

There are similarities and differences in the practice of fasting in Islam and Christianity. What we can learn from these similarities and differences is that every religion has the same and different meanings of one teaching, in fact, within one religion, oftentimes, there are different meanings of one teaching. Therefore, we need to emphasize that religion in practice is very dynamic and depends on the meaning of its respective adherents.

The similarity between Christianity and Islam in the practice of fasting lies in the function and purpose of fasting. Both understand fasting as a spiritual path. While the difference between the two in viewing fasting lies in the meaning of fasting, the legal arguments, types, and procedures of fasting. In Christianity, fasting can be done in a relatively “adjusting” way, while in Islam, it already has standard-rigid rules.

In Christianity, there are many ways of fasting, whereas, in Islam, almost all schools are uniform in fasting. In short, as we have seen, the practice of fasting in Christianity and Islam each has its meaning has its uniqueness, and characteristics, starting from the purpose of fasting, the arguments they use for fasting, the types of fasting, to the way of fasting. By understanding all these aspects, we can understand that religious teachings are dynamic, multi-interpreted, and contextual.

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