

I've no doubt that fasting can be (1) morally virtuous, (2) spiritually effective, (3) psychosick (as, eg, the opposite of bulimia), (4) pneumatosick (spiritual selfabuse by food denial viewed & practiced as in itself righteous), (5) used as a weapon in argument & in political action. This Thinksheet has a look at this range, to deliver from the sentimental notion that fasting is an inherent good--a notion I'm running into more & more as our culture heats up spiritually.

1. Fasting is a geohistorical fact of the human spirit, always & everywhere available in doing religion. Don't knock it if you've not tried it, or even if you have. Please knock antihuman uses of it, as I'm doing here.

2. Early Christian fasting was first from Judaism and then, additionally, from pagan religious praxis. Textual transmission shows an early Christian tendency to heightening-intensifying-ritualizing of fasting, as eg in the addition of fasting to the original text of M. 9.29--on which see the warning to translators not to pollute the text with "fasting": "M.9.29....: In light of the increasing stress in the early church on the necessity of fasting, it is understandable that 'and fasting'* is a gloss which found its way into most witnesses. Among the witnesses that resisted such an accretion are important representatives of the Alexandrian, the Western, and the Caesarean types of text."--p.101, A TEXTUAL COMMENTARY ON THE GREEK NT, Bruce M. Metzger, United Bible Societies/71. (*Unfortunately for the general reader, this is in a Greek font. But still, this vol. is for everybody the best guide in the wilderness of NT textual criticism. It's dirt cheap from the American Bible Society, as are its companions: UNITED BIBLE SOCIETIES' GREEK NT and UNITED BIBLE SOCIETIES' GREEK-ENGLISH DICTIONARY OF THE NT.)....Whoever might be tempted to use the Matthew parallel for "fasting" support should note, on p.43, "Mt.17.21....:copyists frequently inserted material derived from another Gospel, it appears that most manuscripts have been assimilated to the parallel in M.9.29." The thus corrupted texts of the Gospels promote the notion, visible in some streams of Christian art, that Jesus was thin as a rail, pale, ascetic--instead of "a wine-bibber & a gluttonous man," something his attackers wouldn't have been able to use if he'd not been at least robust....I'm not nitpicking. The corrupted texts as Englished (esp. the King James Version, still so popular on the religious right) continue to inform sentimental "devotional" & ethical pop literature. Thank God the New International Version, a product of the right & of excellent scholarship, is of rising influence on the right. It doesn't have "fasting" in M.9.29, but in a fn. rightly says "some manuscripts" have it....Can't resist a tidbit on the origin of NIV: Stephen Paine, my first Greek teacher, was chair of the NT section. Then, at age 65, he taught himself Hebrew so he could chair the OT section--which he did! (At 65, he retired from the presidency of Houghton College & did fulltime on NIV.)

3. Intelligent bod management, which is everybody's personal responsibility, includes experimentation with food & drink as to amount as well as kind. Fasting here correlates, experimentally, with health management (now being called "personal responsibility for wellness"). The aim here is specifically religious only if one is a materialist, believing that mind=brain & self=body. Because materialism is the regnant philosophy of "nature" in our public schools & the media, many are indeed "religious" in both senses vis-a-vis the management of food-drink intake & "exercise." For the middle class (meaning everybody above the poverty line), the goddess is back and her name is Hygeia. One repercussion is that in formal religion, "spiritual healing" tends to be overweighted (when compared with religious his-

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tory) on the side of the physical body.

4. "Fasting" is to be distinguished, as self-chosen, from the transitive use of "starving," ie depriving others of food and/or drink--as Stalin the Ukrainians & the present Ethiopian government the people opposing the marxist rule. Yet the psychophysical effects are similar: pacification increasing into torpor and then into physical death. For one thing, the role of the endorphins increases, so you move from a "high" (similar to "jogger's high," though differently produced) to "bliss" (a high-energy state) to "peace" (a low-energy state)..... Whether active (do-it-yourself "fasting") or passive (imposed "starvation"), eating-drinking deprivation is bod management by bod manipulation, something you do to yourself or is done to you by way of reducing, or shutting off entirely, the flow into the biggest hole in your head (a physical fact Jesus calls attention to, M.7.11/Mt.15.11).... Similar results can be obtained by reducing the flow into the two holes just above the biggest hole in your head: oxygen deprivation by yoga or carboxygen substitution (which, while reducing the flow of oxygen into the body, does not reduce the volume of gas intake). (I've had the full trip of the latter, but the former I've known only as children's-game "holding your breath" till giddy--which, however, is as "spiritual" as yoga-as-technique: no technique is inherently "spiritual").

5. 1 Mar 87, a couple of Sundays ago, a Mormon bishop used on me the propaganda-persuasion technique of fasting as argument. Verbatim, ital. being the bp.: *Are you a member of the church?* THE church, yes, but not your church; I'm a member of the United Church of Christ. *If you were to pray & fast, God would guide you to join the true church.* I have, and God revealed to me that I should not join your church. *How long did you fast?* Long enough. 12 hours? Yes. 24 hours? Yes. 36 hours? Yes (I staring, unsmilingly, into his eyes; he then blinking and turning away). The surprise in the bishop's eyes revealed that he was accustomed to winning this up-the-ante arithmetical pseudological argument. Note here that means/ends was on two levels: (1) The basic, honest level could be put this way: "Have you honestly considered becoming a Mormon?" My answer to that is Yes; and a Buddhist...and...and... I honestly pray the Lord for light from whatever direction I'm facing at the moment, and sooner or later I face in all directions. This baseline is the end, purpose. (2) Fasting is the means question, on the superficial-operational level. To speak the truth on the bottom level, it was necessary for me to lie at the top level (and I'd have continued to top him no matter how high he went with his phoney mathematics!). If I'd not lied, I'd have given him a false and self-deceiving victory, confirming him in his ecclesiastical narcissism, which would have been a sin for me to do. Further, note the inherent stupidity of his argument: No matter the truth-status of his religion, anybody would come to believe it just by fasting enough! The first thing to go from the underfeeding of the neocortex is critical thinking. Maybe that bishop had blown his own critical brains by neocortical deprivation in obedience to the suggestion of some Mormon missionary. Mormonism, a religious offshoot from Christianity, does require a permanent suspension of critical consciousness.

6. Finally, fasting as political action. In my time I've seen a lot of this. Sometimes effective (Ghandi, less so King); usu. of ambiguous value, but leaning toward effectiveness (Dan. Berrigan & others against "Vietnam"); sometimes backfiring (Ir. Rep. Army killers in N.Ireland prison, up against the Iron Lady; but some say Meg Thatcher's agreement with the Republic of Ireland, Orange/Green cogovernment, occurred partly in response to Bobby's death).