

Oct. 18, 2011 – Living Room Dialogue on Understanding Islam: Fasts and Feasts

The Dialogue was designed to include presentations of perspectives from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic practices of Fasts and Feasts followed by dialogue in small groups of all of those present, overall comments in the whole group and then a final reflection on what was learned in the session.

The presenters addressed this issue in a 6 – 8 minute period, “Describe the importance of fasts & feasts in your tradition using a few examples and include what it is like for you to practice these fasts and feasts in New York.”

The presenters were:

Imam Yusuf Hasan, Staff Chaplain, Healthcare Chaplaincy, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital

Jesse Bacon, Jewish Dialogue Group, Jewish Voice for Peace, and recently Jews Occupy Philadelphia

Virginia Dorgan, a Catholic Sister, Director or Network for Peace through Dialogue

Jesse Bacon opened the evening with a brief presentation on feasts and fasts in Judaism. A theme in Judaism, Jesse said, is separation, and the rituals of holy days mark a separation of sacred time from ordinary time.

The rituals setting holy days apart usually include both feasting and fasting at the same time. There are no absolutes in Judaism, which is one of the things he appreciates most about it. On Yom Kippur, Jews focus on cutting away things of the body, but also an opening up to a higher way of being. At Passover, there is a feast, but also an abstinence from certain grains. At Sukkot, there is a feast, but since celebrants leave their homes to eat and sometimes sleep outdoors in hut-like booths, they sacrifice their comfort. In the story told at Purim, Esther gives a banquet, but she also fasts to prepare herself to save her people. At the weekly Shabbat, one fasts from work and feasts on food.

In their prayers during fasting, Jews reflect on their transgressions as individuals and also their responsibilities in a larger social context. A more nationalist Jew might pray for Soviet Jewry, or for keeping Israel strong. Taking a different perspective, Jesse has participated in a fast in solidarity with Gaza and spent the eve of the recent Yom Kippur participating in a ritual at OccupyWallStreet, the encampment in New York City of people protesting corporate greed and injustice.

Virginia Dorgan then spoke about fasts and feasts from a Catholic perspective. Periods of penitence and reflection, Advent and Lent, precede the two major feasts, Christmas and Easter. The periods of time between these special times is regarded as “ordinary time.”

During the four weeks of Advent in preparation for the feast of Christmas, people are encouraged to reflect on how to become a better person. Lent is a penitential six-week period in preparation for the feast of Easter during which people often give up

something in their lives that they usually do in order to not be controlled by that custom or habit, for example drinking alcohol or eating desserts. In recent times people are encouraged to do something different in their lives such as increase prayer times or curb their temper.

The Catholic Church has prescribed fasts. During Lent one should abstain from eating meat on Fridays and to reduce food consumption generally to two small meals or one larger meal a day.

Feasts are also celebrated to honor saints, people you can model your life on.

Imam Yusuf Hasan noted that there are a number of reasons to fast in Islam, which a Muslim does at Ramadan when he or she refrains from eating during the day. One reason is that Allah requires it. A second is that it is good for health, the body rests during a fast from normal demands. In breaking a fast, one eats desserts first, juices and dates, which is a healthful practice. At Eid-ul-fitr, the one-day celebration at the end of Ramadan, there is a feast.

When fasting, Muslims reflect on personal issues, family, and the sufferings of people all over the world. During Eid-ul-fitr, people go out in the community, feed the poor and sick.

A second feast for Muslims is a three-day celebration marking the end of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Children get gifts, cards are sent out to neighbors and friends, and food from sacrificed Rams sent to many places.

Following the brief presentations, participants in the dialogue formed two small groups to discuss what they had heard. Two students who were present added to the diversity of the religious perspectives, one from the Dominican Republic who came from the Pentecostal tradition of Christianity, and a Muslim female student from Saudi Arabia.

The Dominican student was asked by people in his small group about his religion because most of us knew little about it. He said fasts and feasts were not a part of Pentecostal religious practice. Very long Sunday services are, though – they can last for many hours. Celebrants seek a direct experience of God, fostered by testimonials and lots of singing and dance. Music of all kinds is very important. Sometimes there is “speaking in tongues” in which what the speaker is saying is not intelligible but must be interpreted by the pastor.

The Saudi student said she went home for Ramadan because it was too hard to do the fast alone in New York. She was not wearing a head covering and was asked how she felt about wearing the veil. She said that for her wearing a head covering was a cultural requirement but not a necessary part of the Islamic religion. She wears it when she is at home, but not when she is in the United States.

Being part of a minority here makes it harder to practice her religion, but it also makes her firmer in her faith, she said. It’s hard being a good Muslim and trying to fit in at the same time. For example, other students might urge her to go out for a party because “life is short.” But the phrase makes her remember that our bodies will leave this world but our souls stay forever, and she would prefer to stay at home than to party. She enjoys solitude.

Jesse said in his experience as part of a Jewish minority, he also has found that living in the midst of diversity makes you develop a hardiness. He said that there was a

lot of discussion among Jews about what is necessary to maintain the integrity of Jewish culture, and that there are many different points of view within Jewry. For example, some Jews are involved in a “food justice” movement where people attend Jewish farm schools to learn to grow food in an ecologically sustainable manner. There are controversies about “eco-Kosher” meat featuring arguments with meat processors about how animals are slaughtered. There was a lot of controversy about Jews who participated in fasting in solidarity with Gaza. Some regard such issues as diluting what is particular and special about Jewish life.

On the whole, participants in the dialogue noted all that the various religions had much in common in their practice of fasts and feasts. Fasts often come before a feast. The reasons for fasts are similar even though the commemorations celebrate different events or milestones in the particular religion.