The Evangelical Mind

An Evangelical Fasts During Ramadan
By Richard Mouw

I'm going to fast sometime during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month that begins Friday. Not for a whole month, like many devout Muslims. My plan is to go without food a day, while I also spend some time praying.

That may not sound like much of a sacrifice, but it is actually a big step for me. I have never fasted for religious reasons before. The only times I have ever denied myself food for any significant part of a day has been when it was required for some medical procedure.

Nor have I paid much attention before to the religious practices of Muslims. But this year is different. Like many other Christians--and Jews and people of other faiths or of no faith at all--Islam has been much on my mind since Sept. 11. And like many others, I have also thought more intensely about my spiritual life during the past two months. So this year, while Muslims fast during Ramadan, I, too, will experiment with a time of fasting and prayer.

I hope other Christians will join me. And I hope they will do so precisely because of Ramadan. We don't have to sink into a lowest-common-denominator relativism to take seriously the fact that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are all religions that are descended--each in its own unique way, to be sure--from the faith of Abraham.

As a Christian, I take very seriously God's promise of blessing upon all of Abraham's descendents, the offspring of Ishmael as well as those of Isaac (see Genesis 17: 18-21). There has never been a more important time for all of us to be praying fervently that this ancient promise of blessing on all of Abraham's spiritual descendants will be fulfilled with a season of sustained peace in our own troubled day.

I should make it clear that I don't see this as "joining" Muslims in their observance. I don't do well at participating in spiritual practices with people with whom I disagree on religious matters. To tell the truth, I am a bit of a crank when it comes to theology. As an evangelical Christian, I even have a hard time getting in the mood for many of the "ecumenical" events sponsored by inclusive Christian groups. The idea of sharing in a spiritual practice with people whose beliefs are as far from mine as Islam is--that is simply not on the charts for me.

But still, I am motivated in this largely by the example of Muslims I know. I have been pretty lax when it comes to the more rigorous practices of my own Christian tradition. So, as the practitioners of Islam begin a time of self-denial and self-discipline, I have decided that it is time for me to engage in a similar exercise as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We evangelicals have long ignored fasting, and other spiritual practices that we have long considered too "Catholic"--silent retreats, contemplative prayer, and the like. But the mood has begun to change recently. Richard Foster's "Celebration of Discipline" has been a bestseller in evangelical circles, and Campus Crusade for Christ's founder, Bill Bright, has regularly urged evangelicals to observe periods of fasting.

I have appreciated this new openness to the traditional spiritual disciplines--but I have also kept my own personal distance. Now I am ready to take my own first step.

While, like most Americans, I have been pretty angry with a segment of the Muslim world since Sept. 11, I have also been experiencing a new sense of solidarity with many other Muslims. As I watched television during that awful September week, I thought about little Muslim kids in
southern California. In the past, whenever we have had conflicts with Muslim groups in other parts of the world, those children have been taunted and beaten up on the way home from school. This is unspeakably cruel. My heart goes out to those children and their families.

My theology tells me that they are created in the image of the God of the Bible. To desecrate that image is to insult the God whom I worship. During my time of fasting and prayer, I will be praying for the physical and spiritual well-being of my Muslim neighbors.

Properly understood, fasting is a means for focusing on spiritual realities. It is a powerful way of reminding ourselves that our deepest longings as human beings cannot be satisfied by food and drink, but only by realizing--to quote those wonderful words from St. Augustine's prayer--that "our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Sept. 11 was a reminder--albeit an extremely shocking one--of that same spiritual reality. As we saw the easy destruction of what had appeared to be our secure physical fortresses, we were made aware of the vulnerability of the physical defenses we typically rely upon. For many of us the lesson was a profound confirmation of what we should have known all along.

Fasting is a special way of seeing to it that this lesson sticks in our lives. By saying "no" for a time to the things we normally look to for satisfaction, we acknowledge once again that the only truly safe and secure place in the universe is that described by the Psalmist: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'" (Ps. 91: 1-2).