

*Fasting and Feasting  
in Three Traditions:  
Judaism – Christianity – Islam*

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INTERFAITH CONVERSATIONS

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*Booklet #1*



Edited by Kevin Corn  
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# *Fasting and Feasting in Three Traditions*

## **Introduction**

In this small booklet you will find two major mysteries. One is straightforward, the other more subtle. It is easy to see the mystery of feasting and fasting: What connects us more closely to our ordinary material lives than hunger and the satisfaction of hunger? Yet what religion does not use feasting and fasting to infuse adherents' lives with something special and spiritual? This is important to any understanding of religion, but there is another mystery here that is less obvious, but just as important. When people committed to different religious traditions come together to discuss common themes, they often find their own practices and understandings enriched and enlightened. In conversation with Jews and Muslims, Christians get better at the practice of Christianity, Jews at Judaism, and Muslims at Islam.

The three essays presented here formed the basis of just such an interchange that took place at the University of Indianapolis in 2005. Rabbi Arnold Bienstock outlined the practice of fasting in Judaism, with a particular emphasis on the fast of Yom Kippur. Father Anastasios Gounaris presented a critical view of fasting as it is practiced in Orthodox Christianity. Finally, Islamic scholar Yamina Mermer spoke on how the Muslim practice of fasting and feasting in the Holy Month of Ramadan fit into the larger practice of *tawhid*, the “unification of God.”

Read by itself, each essay opens a valuable window into the particular tradition represented. Taken as a group, these essays inform each other, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Whole new questions open up. When Muslims say they are “unifying God” in their practice of the Ramadan fasts, is there some Christians or Jewish corollary? Jews understand fasting at Yom Kippur to strengthen their *teshuva*, or repentance. Does fasting work the same for Muslims and Christians? And might not Jews and Muslims fall prey to similar delusions about their fasts that Fr. Tasso Gounaris says bog down Christians in theirs?

We know a lot about the purpose of food. What can we learn from each other about the purpose of hunger?

— *Kevin Corn*

*University of Indianapolis, 2006*

# *Fasting in the Jewish Tradition*

*By Rabbi Arnold Bienstock*

From Biblical times to the present, fasting has held a significant role in the Jewish religious tradition. Fasting in Judaism is defined as total cessation from all food and drink. A full-day fast begins with sunset in the evening and continues through darkness of the next day. A minor fast day begins with the dawn and concludes at darkness.

The Biblical narrative emphasizes personal fasting as propitiation of divine anger, while later Jewish tradition develops statutory days of communal fasting. Fasting may be a voluntary act of contrition or an obligation of the sacred calendar of Israel. Fasting is portrayed as both inner-directed and outer-directed in both Biblical and rabbinic texts. The act of fasting is believed to result in the spiritual transformation of the individual or the community. Fasting is claimed to influence God to act graciously toward Israel.

Personal fasts are undertaken as a penance for sin. King David atones for his sexual relationship with Bathsheba by fasting (II Samuel 12). Jews later elected to fast after experiencing nightmares, presumably provoked by unacceptable behavior. The Jewish bride and groom fast on their wedding day in order to begin their marriage in a state of purity. The act of fasting atones for the prior sins of the bride and groom. Jews would often fast on the *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the death of their family members or their teachers. Fasting is an act of congregational penance if the sacred and beloved Torah scroll is dropped to the ground. Because of this prohibition, Jews are scrupulous in their respect of the Torah scroll. Fasting arouses the compassion of God to forgive the penitent. Statutory communal fasts in Judaism reflect the desire for divine forgiveness.

The most famous fast day of Judaism, with its origins in Leviticus 23, is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day, God instructs the people of Israel, "You shall afflict your souls." The rabbinic commentators interpreted the Biblical phrase "affliction of the soul" to embrace a generic understanding of denying oneself physical pleasure on Yom Kippur. The prohibitions included not just eating and drinking, but also bathing, washing, and anointing. Sexual abstinence also becomes part of the rabbinic understanding of "affliction of the soul." Even the wearing of leather is prohibited because of its association with luxury or rabbinic compassion for animal life (*tsaar baalei hayyim*).

Leviticus describes the sacrificial offerings of the two goats as gifts of atonement, which are paralleled by the communal fast. The patterns of abstinence during Yom Kippur embody the Jewish idea of *teshuvah*, of repentance. The self-sacrifice of denial arouses the divine attribute of forgiveness.

In later books of the Bible, the prophetic tradition develops the idea that, in addition to propitiating divine wrath, fasting serves to transform the individual

spiritually. Isaiah 58 interprets the genuine fast as the denial that awakens the ethical sensitivity of the Jew. For the prophetic voice, ethical perfection is the ultimate demand of the religious life. Ritual behavior is meaningful only if it is marked by the inner transformation of the character of the penitent. The prophetic voice condemns ritual expression that is not marked by spiritual transformation. Rabbinic tradition selected the Biblical readings of Leviticus 23 and Isaiah 58 as the readings of Yom Kippur to share a balanced perspective on fasting. Leviticus 23 presents fasting as a propitiatory offering of atonement. Isaiah 58 asserts that the genuine fast is self-evaluation.

The Biblical narrative not only shares the idea of the personal fast. It presents communal fasting as a collective expression of repentance. The short story of Jonah portrays the people of Nineveh engaged in communal fasting to overturn the prophetic decree against them. The donning of sackcloth and ashes is parallel to the abstinence from food. These actions change the destiny of Nineveh, and the city is spared destruction. The narrative is utilized to teach that the gate of *teshuvah*, of repentance, is open to all. The prophet Jonah learns that even the pagans of Nineveh may truly repent of their sins. The rabbinic lesson emphasizes the triumph of divine mercy over punishment. To emphasize this point, the Book of Jonah is the scriptural reading for the afternoon service of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The ritual drama of the Day of Atonement captures the transformative power of communal fasting. The atmosphere is that of contrition and introspection. As Yom Kippur is a twenty-four-hour fast, with total abstinence from food and drink, the traditional worshippers spend the entire day in prayer. The confession of sins is chanted communally, emphasizing Judaism's belief in the centrality of the spiritual community. The fast is a spiritual cleansing, both on an individual and communal level. Rabbinic Judaism applies the concept of ritual purity from Leviticus to the idea of spiritual and moral purity. Yom Kippur, with its rituals of denial, cleanses the soul.

## *Fasting from Fasting*

*Fr. Anastasios Gounaris*

The start of Great Lent—and the Great Forty-Day Fast (*Megali Tessarakosti* in Greek)—means that, among other spiritual disciplines of Lent, many Orthodox Christians will be busily trying to meet the Church's fasting rules and traditions. Unfortunately, some will be trying harder to honor the letter than the spirit of the “laws” of fasting.

First of all, it should be said that, strictly speaking, the vast majority of Orthodox Christians do not even come close to “fasting” during Great Lent. According to the dictionary, fasting is the practice of “abstaining from food”—all food. So what we commonly call fasting is more accurately called “abstaining” from certain foods. But for purposes of common usage, we'll consider “fasting” as referring to the spiritual discipline of abstaining from certain foods.

Fasting is part of a group of spiritual disciplines that, in the original Greek, all come under the heading of *askesis* (pronounced AHSS-key-cese). These spiritual disciplines also include prayer, mortification of the passions, practicing humility, almsgiving, controlling the tongue, and others that most think of as being observed in their purest form only by monastics. To give you some idea of the meaning of this word, Modern Greek commonly uses the word *askesis* to denote exercise of the physical type (the kind you do in a gym). This is why it's not at all strange that we refer to monks and nuns as the spiritual “athletes” of the Church, because they are always training, engaging in this *askesis* on a “professional” level. If monastics are the spiritual athletes of Orthodoxy, then most non-monastics could rightly be considered as the weekend athletes of the spiritual world.

But, getting back to the “letter” of the fasting “laws,” let it first be said that fasting traditions in the Orthodox Church have evolved, developing organically, over the two millennia of Church history. There was never one synod or one ecumenical council that definitively delineated the all rules of fasting, for all times and all places of all of the Orthodox world.

Having said this, there is a generally accepted set of guidelines when it comes to fasting. Put simply, to fast in the Orthodox way during Great Lent one basically becomes a vegetarian: no meats, no animal products. Stricter fasting days within Lent (the weekdays of Lent) additionally restrict olive oil and wine (staples of the Mediterranean diet), and “looser” days (Annunciation, Palm Sunday) allow fish. Because of a curious quirk in the milieu within which Orthodoxy developed, foods that we think of as delicacies—shellfish like scallops, shrimp, lobsters, sea urchins, squid, octopus, mussels—are allowed under all but the strictest fasting regimens.

Trying to follow the letter—not the spirit—of this well-known Orthodox Lenten discipline gets many into trouble.

At any rate, many Americans (especially Midwesterners) are not aficionados of seafood delicacies anyway, so any fasting sounds horrific, unattainable to the typical twenty-first-century “meat and potatoes” man or woman. And with good reason. When and where fasting rules of the Church developed, our “modern” carnivorous ways were unheard of. Not so long ago, no one but the wealthiest and most privileged had fresh meat more than a handful of times a month. Very few were wealthy enough to sacrifice a prize egg-laying chicken or milk-giving cow, sheep, or goat simply because of a hankering for a juicy roast or steak. Animal proteins were to be had mainly in the form of preserved meats, milk, cheese, eggs, etc. The remaining diet was largely composed of beans, grains, fruits, and vegetables. So back when meat was such an infrequent treat (if it was had at all), swearing off of it for forty days was not a difficult or traumatic transition for the average Constantine or George or Vladimir on the streets Thessaloniki, Bethlehem, or Sevastopol.

Since the very idea of dietary deprivation is so scary and foreign to Americans, many convince themselves that they could never keep the dietary disciplines of Lent. Consequently, they figure that if they cannot fully observe the fasting rules, that they shouldn't do so at all. They stick to the old adage “If you can't do it right, then don't do it at all.”

Yet, these people do themselves a disservice. They're like people who decide not to exercise at all, simply because they can never hope to attain the standards achieved by world-class professional or Olympic athletes. Yet we all know that some exercise is better than none at all. And so it is with fasting. Some fasting—especially for the general discipline it teaches—is much better than none at all. Dotted all the i's and crossed all the r's of the fasting canons is not the point. And just like some weekend athletes eventually end up finishing a marathon, doing at least some fasting can lead to unexpected heights of spiritual progress and attainment. It's all about, as was sung long ago in a children's Christmas TV special, putting “one foot in front of the other.” (The Church has never expected the very young, elderly, weak, and infirm to follow the rules of fasting rigorously.)

There are others raised in our food-worshipping, meat-and-potatoes culture that see the forty-day fast as a Church-inflicted period of culinary sadism and deprivation. They see the Church—not to mention Christ—as imposing fasting as a means of punishment for sins. Some even imagine Christ as getting His jollies from watching the trials and tribulations induced by APD (animal product deprivation).

Fasting has never been about punishment or deprivation, though. That is why Orthodoxy has never embraced the popular American Christian idea of giving up favorite treats for Lent. That would somehow imply punishment—and would certainly be contrary to the concept of “shared struggle” that a common Lenten regimen reinforces.



There are still others who, in trying faithfully and fully to follow the fasting guidelines of Lent, get trapped into an extreme form of legalism. They'll read the label ingredients on even an innocent-looking box of crackers, on the chance that the list might reveal a damnation-inducing amount of whey or animal shortening. They concentrate assiduously on buying, trading, and reading ever-more-creative Lenten recipes and cookbooks that feature new and creative ways of using soy protein, spices, and expensive shellfish to assuage the pain of Lenten sacrifice. They see nothing wrong with easing the hunger pangs of Lent with a second (or third) bowl of strictly Lenten bean soup and some extra bread with generous dollops of hummus on top. Then some of these same people will break bread with—not to mention the hearts of—non-Orthodox or non-Christian friends (and ruin their meal to boot) by making a big production of how they cannot possibly eat what they are having because it would ruin the fast.

As anyone can see, the true spirit of Great Lent transcends any set of strict prescriptions or prohibitions. Great Lent should be a time when the whole idea of food—Lenten or not—should be de-emphasized. It should be a period when the truly pious do not even open a cookbook—even a Lenten one. This period should be time during which a healthy, vigorous people barely use their stoves or ovens and, instead, subsist mainly on “quick and dirty” meals like salads, nuts, breads, fruits, and vegetables and other dishes that require a minimum of preparation. The truly observant should not be looking to take advantage of Lent as an excuse to chow down vast amounts of shellfish while concurrently scouring ingredient lists for the slightest trace of a dreaded animal product ingredient. Finally, portion size should be moderated, too, especially for those who are already vegetarians or who do not eat much in the way of animal products to start with. The spirit of Lent is not about looking for dietary loopholes, but, rather, about temporarily separating ourselves from the entire all-pervasive culture of food.

Why all this? Because we should instead devote the time, thought, and exertion dedicated to preparing and eating food to disciplines such as prayer, confession, worship, study, and almsgiving. By breaking out of our endless societal obsession with food, we help convince ourselves of Christ's admonition that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). How can we ever hear the words that proceed from God's mouth against the background noise of eating, cooking, thinking about eating, planning meals, and facing endless advertisements about food? Moreover, the discipline and confidence gained from mastering our obsession with food can be applied to mastering the human tendency to abuse any and all of God's gifts, including drugs, alcohol, sex, etc.

Finally, most Orthodox are familiar with the well-known quote of St. John Chrysostom that it does us no good to abstain from certain foods if we nevertheless

persist in “consuming” our fellow brother and sister with our tongues. When it comes to this type of “spiritual cannibalism,” most of us could easily outdo the infamous Donner Party when it comes to quantity of human flesh consumed. Instead of concentrating on gracing ourselves with Christian virtues, we garnish our plate with the bitter herbs of resentments, we spice our food with the salt of envy, and top it off with the sweet relish of self-righteousness. More than anything, we need to embrace spiritual fasting and purge ourselves of these instincts, rather than worrying ourselves silly about whether those soy corndogs have egg whites in them or not. We become so obsessed with what we can and cannot eat that we forget the most important part of the fast. As the Lenten Triodion says:

Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love, and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness, to behold his Passover.

We place so much importance on material things that we forget the simplicity of happiness. The core of life is not the food we eat, or homes we live in, cars we drive, or money we make, for that matter. It is the simple love we share and the gratitude we have for what we have been given. We may desire a milk shake, but our thirst for the Lord should overcome this. We must train ourselves to the point where feeding our spiritual hunger is far more satisfying than slaking any physical hunger we might have. Perhaps in denying ourselves the graven image of our foods, we can direct ourselves to the true Spiritual Bread, He in Whose Image we were created—Christ our God. Let us empty our minds and hearts from all the cares and worries and distractions of this life so that we can clearly see the path of salvation that leads though His empty Cross and His empty Tomb. *Megali Tessarakosti*—the Great Fast—can and should become freedom and a delight from worldly idols and temptations that enslave us and that keep us away from our Lord and His free gift of salvation and eternal life.

So, this year, let’s “fast from the Fast.” Let’s remind ourselves and each other that Lenten rules and traditions, while valuable and necessary, are not an end unto themselves.

In the Great Compline service that is done during Lent in some parishes, there is an antiphonal hymn that continually repeats the refrain “For God is with us.” Maybe this is the greatest way to break the spirit of the fast: to forget that God is with us and that everything we do should be in recognition of and thanksgiving for this basic truth. Perhaps, in the end, it’s about remembering that it’s not about pizza, but about Pascha.

## *In Islam, Fasting is Feasting*

*By Yamina Mermer*

When we talk about fasting in Islam what comes to mind is the month of Ramadan. At the end of this month of fasting comes the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast. This is the first of the two main feasts of Islam. The second is the Feast of Sacrifice, and it is celebrated about two months after the end of Ramadan.

*Why does the month of fasting culminate in feasting?*

First let us remember that fasting is one of the pillars of Islam (“Islam” literally means surrendering to the will of God and making peace, or *silm*); it is said that fasting brings about spiritual fulfillment and that in the month of fasting, goods are multiplied many times. For the Muslims, it is a month of blessings.

*What happens when we fast? What is so special about fasting?*

Often people say that when you fast, you remember the hungry and share with them. But I think if we don’t understand the meaning of fasting, we may think about food all day, and we may become more self-centered and forget about the poor and needy.

When Muslims (I mean people who strive to surrender to the will of God) fast, they realize best how weak they are, how fragile the human body is, how needy they are and how dependent on so many things that they don’t even think of usually. It’s a situation that makes us wonder who we really are: created, needy beings. Our needs are countless but usually we are not aware of them because we take them for granted. And if we are created, if we are needy, then everyone, everything else is also; they are all created with all of their qualities. Everything belongs to the Maker alone. This is the beginning of the process of *tawhid* (i.e. unifying God).

*Tawhid* is not only to believe in one god, as opposed to two or three. No. It is to realize that all lovable attributes of perfection belong not to things themselves, but to their Maker. The Quran teaches *tawhid* in this way: “There is no deity (no one worth being loved and worshipped) saved He, to him alone belong the attributes of perfection.”

So with fasting we experience *tawhid*. When we fast, we are hungry and the food tastes good; we appreciate the value of food; we realize how precious a gift it is and we are filled with gratitude. This makes us reflect on the countless gifts of mercy that we have been given, like health, sight, and so on—and everything becomes valuable; everything is mercy, we realize how great a mercy air and water are.

Everything becomes a sign speaking of God’s mercy and other attributes of perfection. Food becomes a token of love, a sign of divine favor, a sign that turns our attention from the food itself to the bestower of the favor. We also understand

that hunger has not been given to us just to fill our stomachs and derive temporary pleasure from it, but to make that pleasure a sign, a means to recognize the giver of the pleasure and turn to Him in love and gratitude.

And when the food is perceived as a divine favor, the pleasure it gives is far greater than the pleasure obtained from perishable matter. It gives a lasting delight: the pleasure of feeling in the presence of God's everlasting mercy and love. This pleasure is the essence of worship; it is the seed of the pleasures of paradise.

That is why every time we break the fast, we experience the good news of everlasting pleasure, and we rejoice. In the month of fasting, every evening is a feast. And at the end of the month, the whole community celebrates the feast of the breaking of the fast. Feasting is centered on worship rather than food. The feast is celebrated with communal prayers and glorification of God that last three days. People visit each other and offer presents to each other to express their gratitude to God and reflect His attributes of bestower and compassion in their own lives. Feasting is basically rejoicing at being the honored guest of the merciful creator, a state that we realize best when we fast with the intention of achieving *tawhid*.

Indeed, the more we realize how needy we are, the more we feel drowned in mercy, and our whole being is filled with gratitude for the compassionate creator, and those who surrender to this reality say: "Praise be to God, Sustainer of the worlds" (Qur'an 1: 2), i.e., Lord of all gifts, the Lord of everything. And praising the merciful creator is the gist of worship.

Fasting reminds us of our needs. And our needs are the means to taste all things; our needs are the means to feel empathy for the needy, and everything is needy; through our needs we communicate with the rest of the world in the name of God.

We realize that we are not alien to other people or to other beings. We all belong to the same Merciful and Compassionate sustainer. Even if the stomach yells, the spirit rejoices to this good news. Then we can share everything with everybody because we are not anxious about providing for our needs. The Merciful Sustainer has already taken care of them. It is the end of egotism. We are liberated from the illusory world of the ego. "For them there are the glad tidings of happiness in the life of this world and in the life to come" (10:64).

Giving and sharing with others is not a sacrifice anymore because nothing is ours anyway. Everything is continuously given to us, and as we share with others we remember and confirm this reality of given-ness. That is why sharing is a source of joy, a source of realizing our position of honored guests of the Lord of the worlds.

So if we fast with this awareness, we remember the true owner of bounties and lovable things. Food is not mere stuff, but a gift from God that is to be eaten and used in the name of God. We then love food in the name of its maker who made it lovable and offered it to us as a token of love and friendship.

If we love things for themselves, if we imagine that the qualities that make them lovable are inherent to them, then we are making them into idols. For love is worship. And the worship of idols is just the opposite of *tawhid*. And the Qur'an teaches that to ascribe partners to God is to ascribe qualities manifested on things, beings, and in ourselves to the things themselves rather than to their Maker. "And God's alone are the attributes of perfection; invoke Him then by these and stand aloof from all who distort the meaning of His attributes" (i.e., by applying them to other beings or objects; Qur'an 7:180). Things are not beautiful. They are made beautifully!

We love beauty but the beauty in all created things belongs only to the Maker. Thus things should be loved in the name of their Maker. (That is why Muslims utter the phrase "In the name of God" at the beginning of various daily tasks.) In other words, in order to submit to the cosmic reality of *tawhid*, we need to break our idols, we need to "slaughter" or kill our illusion that things are inherently good, that they are lovable in and of themselves as though they were independent of their maker.

This is what is symbolized by the sacrifice of a sheep at the feast of sacrifice. The feast of Sacrifice is the most important feast of the Muslim calendar. It is celebrated about two months after the feast of the breaking of the fast. It concludes the Pilgrimage to Mecca. It lasts for four days and commemorates Abraham's surrendering to the will of God.

The feast reenacts Abraham's faithfulness by sacrificing an animal. The family eats about a third of the meal and donates the rest to the poor and the neighbors. In Islam, Abraham is known as the father of *tawhid*. Abraham destroyed all the idols that his people worshipped; i.e., he destroyed idols in the outer world. He knew that none besides God was worth being worshipped. Ultimately, he had to destroy all idols in the inner heart so that his love would be for the sake of God alone. But how?

Not by renouncing the world physically, as he first taught. The Qur'an says that God accepted his intention, but he taught him that the renunciation was metaphorical. The solution was not to kill his son Ishmael but to love him in the name of his Maker. Abraham surrendered to God's will because he knew that it was God Who had made him love his son, and he trusted in God's infinite mercy and wisdom. So God taught him that, in order to confirm the reality of *tawhid* in his life, he didn't need to leave the world and renounce his son, but rather Abraham had to love his son in the name of God. He didn't have to renounce the world physically.

For what would be the point in the creation of the world then? And how is it possible to know God with all His beautiful attributes if His creation is to be forsaken? By imagining them? Surely, it is by witnessing God's works of mercy that we can know

Him and make friends with him. That is, in Islam, asceticism is only metaphorical; the world is not an obstacle to our relationship with God. On the contrary, everything in the world is a sign (*aya*) as the Qur'an says; it is speech telling about God's divine names and attributes and making Him known to us.

This celebration is also the occasion of a great feast, where prayers and worship are at center. At the eve of this great feast, it is the tradition to recite the 112th sura of the Qur'an, the chapter of *ikhlas* (the declaration of God's perfection), a thousand times as a reminder of the reality of the story of Abraham and his son. During this feast, Muslims are asked to repeat the words *allahu akbar* (God is the greatest) after all their daily prayers.

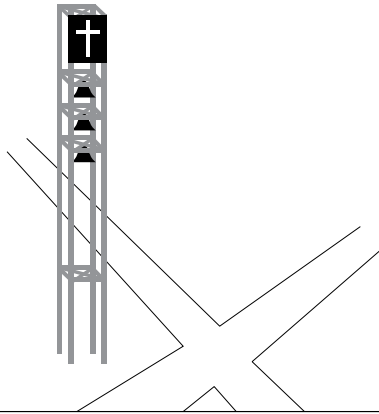
So in this sense, fasting from idolatry is feasting and rejoicing at God's friendship and love. This is what *tawhid*, which is the main purpose in the teachings of the Qur'an, is about. *Tawhid* is the gist of Islam, and the gist of worship, and the gist of fasting, and the gist of feasting. Conscious fasting is a means to experience the reality of *tawhid*, and for this reason it culminates in feasting and rejoicing in the good news of *tawhid*: all beloved attributes of perfection belong to God alone and not to mortal beings; therefore they are eternal; they are ours forever. Hence, we can say that fasting is feasting.

## *Contributors*

**Rabbi Arnold Bienstock** leads Congregation Shaarey Tefilla, an Indianapolis synagogue affiliated with Conservative Judaism. He received his BA from Columbia University in 1975, and his MA in Jewish Studies from Jewish Theological Seminary in 1978.

**Father Anastasios Gounaris** has been pastor of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, since 1991. He frequently gives lectures about Orthodox theology and life for various universities and civic groups in the Indianapolis area. He also offers lectures on selected topics for the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Detroit.

**Dr. Yamina Mermer** was born in Oran in Algeria in 1958 and graduated from the Department of Theoretical Physics in the University of Algeria. She received her MS degree from Durham University in the United Kingdom in 1982, and in 1985 earned her doctoral degree in particle physics from the same university. Currently, she is a PhD student at the Islamic Studies program of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. She has published one book and several articles on the relationship of modern science and Islam.



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