

Food and Religion

Eid-ul-Fitr sermon, 6th July 2016

at the Lahore Ahmadiyya London Centre, Darus Salaam

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<p>“O you who believe, eat of the good things that We have provided you with, and give thanks to Allah if He it is Whom you serve.” (2:172)</p>	<p>يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُلُوا مِن طَيِّبَاتِ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ وَ اشْكُرُوا لِلَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾</p>
<p>“On those who believe and do good there is no blame for what they eat, when they keep their duty and believe and do good deeds, then keep their duty and believe, then keep their duty and do good (to others). And Allah loves the doers of good.” (5:93)</p>	<p>لَيْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ جُنَاحٌ فِيمَا طَعَمُوا إِذَا مَا اتَّقَوْا وَآمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ ثُمَّ اتَّقَوْا وَآمَنُوا ثُمَّ اتَّقَوْا وَأَحْسَنُوا وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾</p>
<p>“Say: Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah, which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good provisions? Say: These are for the believers in the life of this world, purely (theirs) on the day of Resurrection. Thus do We make the messages clear for a people who know.” (7:32)</p>	<p>قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كَذَلِكَ نَفْصَلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾</p>

Eid-ul-Fitr,* the famous annual Muslim festival today, marks the breaking of the fast, the end of the daily fasting during the preceding month of Ramadan. It does not commemorate some historical landmark event, such as victory in a battle by the early Muslims, or any famous person’s birth or death. Every year it marks the end of fasting, a personal achievement for each Muslim, in perhaps their own individual ways. We tried our best to reach to some degree the standard required by the Quran in its verse:

“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil.” (2:183)

and to attain the state described in the words:

“And when My servants ask you concerning Me, surely I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls on Me, so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.” (2:186)

* In proper transliteration it is written as: ‘Īd-ul-Fiṭr.

Moreover, in our dealings with others we learnt the importance of the instruction:

“And do not swallow up your property among yourselves by false means, nor seek to gain access thereby to the judges, so that you may swallow up a part of the property of (other) people wrongfully while you know.” (2:188)

These lessons were meant to be learnt by refraining from food and drink during certain hours of the day. Now we have returned to eating and drinking since this morning.

Food is mentioned several times in the Holy Quran. Eating of food is also associated with establishing and strengthening social relations. This is a fact universally recognised and practised in all societies and religions. It seems that *eating brings us closer to people* and *not eating brings us closer to God*. Both are equally important. The Quran repeatedly describes Muslims as “those who believe and do good”. Believing is our relationship with God and doing good deeds is also relationship with other people, and more generally with everything around us.

Refusing to eat with someone is tantamount to shunning them socially or on grounds of difference of religion, community or race. This is why the Quran gives us the following guidance in a long verse which begins:

“There is no blame on the blind man, nor any blame on the lame, nor blame on the sick. Nor on yourselves that you eat in your own houses, or your fathers’ houses, or your mothers’ houses, ... (list of various other relatives here) ..., or at your friends. It is no sin in you that you eat together or separately.” (24:61)

Some people used to consider it unworthy of them to eat with the disabled. The Quran states that it is not wrong for them to eat with the healthy, and not wrong for the healthy to eat with them. If such disabled persons are to eat with the able-bodied ones, then it is more likely that the able-bodied will be providing the food and doing the cooking, and bringing the disabled to the table. But the Quran leaves this open. It may be that the disabled would wish to demonstrate their independence by inviting the able-bodied ones to their homes.

These words of the Quran apply not only to the physically disabled, but to all those who are looked down upon in society. There are religious communities in this world whose higher ranking members look down upon certain classes in their own communities and believe that what they themselves eat is too holy and sacred to be given to the so-called lower people, and what the latter eat is not fit and religiously clean enough for the self-styled higher ones. The Quran repudiates all such notions.

The above verse mentions that you may eat at “your fathers’ houses, or your mothers’ houses, or your brothers’ houses, or your sisters’ houses, or your uncles’ houses or your aunts’ houses”. The reason for this is that, earlier in the same chapter, the Quran had taught respect for privacy of all others, saying: “O you who believe, do not enter houses other than your own houses, until you have asked permission and greeted their inhabitants” (24:27) and also just before this verse it had emphasized privacy of husband and wife from the close

ones within the home itself (24:58–59). So this verse says that this should not be taken too far, so that you behave like strangers with close relatives, but that informal social relations must be maintained with them. Remember that eating with others is not about consuming food only, but about social relations with others. Notice that this verse does not compel a Muslim to anything but gives him choice and latitude: “It is no sin in you that you eat together or separately.”

The Quran says: Mix with people if you like, maintain your separateness if you like, but don’t go to an extreme of either disregarding the privacy of others or remaining always aloof from them.

As we know, the Quran says: “This day (all) good things are made lawful for you. And the food of those who have been given the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them” (5:5). The word for “lawful” here is the same as *halal*. This occurs only shortly after the words: “This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion” (5:3). In trying to explain this, people focus their attention on the food itself, and what kind of food of the People of the Book is allowable to Muslims. But really, it is referring to social mixing and being both hosts and guests of one another. Even more generally, it indicates that Muslims can live as minorities under non-Muslims and non-Muslims can live as minorities under Muslims. When you are the minority in a country, you are, so to speak, eating the food of the majority by being part of their economic, civil and political system. From the Muslim point of view, this means that Muslims can live in non-Muslim countries peacefully as their citizens, and non-Muslims can live in Muslim countries as their citizens. Both these points are today denied by the Islamic extremists.

If we take these words in the literal sense of food, then they mean that food does not become disallowed on grounds of *who* is offering it, whatever religion or community he may belong to. It can only become disallowed on grounds of *what* is being offered.

It is generally thought that religion either commands its followers to do things that are a hardship, such as praying or fasting, or it forbids them to do things that people find pleasure in doing. So it is a spoil sport, both as regards what it commands you to do and what it forbids you to do. But that is not true of Islam. Its message is: Do the things that humans find pleasure in doing, but remain within certain limits. The Quran says:

“Say: Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah, which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good provisions? Say: These are for the believers in the life of this world, purely (theirs) on the day of Resurrection.” (7:32)

The “adornment” of Allah and the “good provisions” are all kinds of comforts, good things, foods of this life for the physical well-being of man. No one can forbid their use when Allah has allowed it. Believers are not to be denied them, just as non-believers use and enjoy them. However, believers use them for constructive purposes. For example, eating gives them energy, which they expend in doing good deeds. Using other good things makes them

thankful to God, so they bow to Him more and help deprived people to enjoy them as well. What such believers have on the day of Judgment, exclusively, is the spiritual benefit they derived from the use of the good things. Those who enjoy these things in this world only for the temporary physical and bodily pleasure gain nothing permanent from them.

The Quran not only tells us what is unlawful to eat but gives us the positive instruction to eat. Addressing all mankind, it says:

“O people, eat the lawful and good things from what is in the earth, and do not follow the footsteps of the devil. Surely he is an open enemy to you.” (2:168)

“...eat and drink and do not be extravagant; surely He does not love the extravagant.” (7:31)

Addressing Muslims, it says:

“O you who believe, eat of the good things that We have provided you with, and give thanks to Allah if He it is Whom you serve.” (2:172)

Another verse in the Quran states:

“On those who believe and do good *there is no blame for what they eat*, when they keep their duty and believe and do good deeds, then keep their duty and believe, then keep their duty and do good (to others). And Allah loves the doers of good.” (5:93)

We find these days discussions regarding one food or another, whether it is allowed in Islam or not, according to what it contains, and whether some ingredient or other in it makes it unlawful, whether the implement with which it was served contained traces of something unlawful, etc. This verse gives us to understand that to believe and do good is more important than such minute discussions. As long as a person keeps his duty, that is, fulfils his religious obligations, does good deeds, does good to others, then they need not give undue importance to such small matters — matters which can never be resolved.

This verse is reminiscent of an incident of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. His opponents objected that his disciples did not wash their hands before eating, according to the Jewish religious ritual for washing. Jesus replied: “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man”. And he explained this by saying: “whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated, but those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matthew, ch. 15, v. 11, 17–19).

Of course, Jesus did *not* mean that you need not wash your hands before eating; *nor* does the Quran mean that those who believe and do good can eat whatever they like, even what is prohibited in the Quran. What is meant is that *merely and only* by following these

physical regulations you cannot become good and righteous. But most people seem to think that you can.

Food being so important to human existence, it features in the stories of many prophets. God said to Adam: “O Adam, dwell you and your wife in the garden, and eat from it a plentiful (food) wherever you wish, and do not approach this tree or you would be from among the unjust” (2:35). This is really an address to humanity, saying you can fulfil all your physical desires of food and comfort, but do not be tempted to go beyond the limit, over-consuming and also infringing the rights of others, because you would be wrong-doers then.

After Adam, Abraham also mentioned food in his preaching. He described Allah as the One “Who created me, then He shows me the way, and *Who gives me to eat and to drink*, and when I am sick, He heals me, and Who will cause me to die, then give me life, and Who, I hope, will forgive me my mistakes on the day of Judgment” (26:78–82). He also described Allah in these words: “He feeds and is not fed” (6:14).

Abraham prayed to Allah, when settling Ishmael at Makkah, to provide its people of later times with security and fruits (2:126, 14:37). It was in reference to this that the Quran addressed the Quraish of Makkah saying: “So let them serve the Lord of this House, Who feeds them against hunger, and gives them security against fear” (106:3–4). Abraham had also prayed that his distant offspring may be a Muslim nation (2:128).

Food also features in the story of the prophet Joseph. The dreams he interpreted for his two fellow-prisoners, as well as the King’s dream, all related to food or drink. According to the Bible his two fellow-prisoners were the butler and the baker of the King. The dream of the King was that he saw seven lean cows devour seven fat ones, and seven heads of grain on a plant which were green, and seven others which were dry. Joseph interpreted it as meaning that there would be seven years of good harvest, followed by seven years of drought. He advised that they place in storage some of the grain that grew in the first seven years, and use from these reserves in the following seven years of drought. Joseph was placed in charge of this national food programme by the King, an office which he discharged with great ability and honesty.

Coming to Moses, after crossing the Red Sea, he and the Israelites found themselves in a wilderness while waiting for the promise of conquering the promised land. Here they faced a struggle, and only had what are called “manna and quails” for food, which were said to have been sent down to them from heaven. However, they complained after a while:

“And when you said: Moses, we cannot endure one food, so pray your Lord on our behalf to bring forth for us out of what the earth grows, of its herbs and its cucumbers and its garlic and its lentils and its onions. He said: Would you exchange what is better for what is worse?” (2:61)

What Moses meant was that it was better for them to learn discipline and gain moral nourishment through the hardship they were undergoing than to hanker after physical food.

In case of Jesus, according to the Quran, his disciples asked of him:

“Is your Lord able to send down food to us from heaven?” (5:112)

and Jesus' reply was:

“Keep your duty to Allah if you are believers.”

The meaning is that instead of praying to God to send food they should seek their spiritual betterment through keeping their duty to God. According to the Gospel of John, some followers of Jesus asked him to show them the sign of bringing bread down from heaven, and Jesus told them to seek the eternal bread, not the bread which decays but the “true bread from heaven” (See John, ch. 6, verses 31, 32 and 27). Again, the meaning is that they should look for their spiritual sustenance.

The Quran then tells us that on the insistence of his followers, Jesus prayed thus:

“Our Lord, send down to us food from heaven which should be to us an ever-recurring happiness (or *Eid*) to the first of us and the last of us, and a sign from You, and give us sustenance and You are the best of the sustainers.” (5:114)

Allah replied:

“Surely I will send it down to you, but whoever disbelieves (or is ungrateful) afterwards from among you, I will punish him with a punishment with which I will not punish anyone among the nations.” (5:115)

Some two thousand years, or a little less, after this, the followers of Jesus of the later times — the nations of the West — have been granted food in such abundance, and with such choice all the year round, that it is unprecedented in human history. And the more one is granted something by God, the greater is the punishment for being ungrateful for it!

But what Jesus really prayed for, because he told them it was more important, was spiritual sustenance, since he said:

“Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matthew, 4:4)

“Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.” (John, 6:27)

And that food and that word of God that Jesus mentioned has been provided for mankind in the Holy Quran.

We have seen above that the followers of Moses and of Jesus asked these prophets for physical food as sign of their being from God. On the other hand, the Companions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, like their great master, subsisted on the simplest and barest of food, cheerfully without complaint. They reported to history that, after settling in Madinah,

the Holy Prophet and members of his household, during the rest of his life, never got to fill their stomachs for more than three days in a row (Bukhari, h. 5374, h. 5416). His wife Aishah related that during the life of the Holy Prophet: “we used to subsist on dates and water” (Bukhari, h. 5383). This was a time when the Holy Prophet was the head of an entire community and the ruler of a state, first a city-state and later an entire country. They never asked the Holy Prophet to prove his truthfulness by calling on Allah to send them food from heaven.

A long time after the Holy Prophet’s death, when Muslims became very prosperous, sometimes the Companions recalled the times of privation during the Holy Prophet’s life and cried in memory of those days. I refer here to two such incidents. Abu Hurairah was passing by some people who were roasting a sheep. They invited him to join them. Abu Hurairah suddenly became overcome by the memory of the Holy Prophet and said to them:

“The Messenger of Allah left this world and never even got to eat bread to the full.”

Recalling the simple, hard life of the Holy Prophet, Abu Hurairah felt unable to accept their invitation (Bukhari, h. 5414).

A famous Companion, Abdur Rahman ibn Auf was once fasting and a meal was brought to him to end the fast. Seeing the food, he suddenly recalled the Companions who had been killed in battle during the Holy Prophet’s time. He cried and said that Muslims then did not even have sufficient cloth to cover their bodies for burial. If the head was covered the feet were left bare, and if the feet were covered the head was left bare. “Now worldly wealth has been made abundant for us”, he said. Then he added: “I fear that the rewards of our deeds have been given to us earlier in this world.” Then he started weeping and left his food (Bukhari, h. 1274, h. 1275).

The Companions of the Holy Prophet were acting on the teachings also given earlier by Moses and Jesus to their followers, namely, that instead of asking for food you should concentrate on your moral and spiritual nourishment. The contemporary followers of Moses, and of Jesus, in each case wanted their prophet to prove his truthfulness by getting food for them sent by God. But the Companions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad regarded it as a sign of his truthfulness that he, along with them, went through suffering and deprivation. When eventually prosperity came, they were worried in case it meant they would be deprived of spiritual reward.

Let us pray that after Ramadan we are thankful to Allah for the blessing of food and other physical necessities and comforts bestowed upon us, and entreat Him that we may use them within the proper limits, remembering also our duty to provide the same for the deprived people, and may we turn to the spiritual nourishment He has provided to human beings through His revelation, the Quran, and His Holy Prophet, Muhammad, and passed down to us by the hands of the righteous of all ages — *Ameen*.

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