

## Food and Islam

**Eid-ul-Fitr Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 13 May 2021**

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُلُوا مِن طَيِّبَاتِ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِلَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

“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)

قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كَذَلِكَ نَفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

“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)

*Eid-ul-Fitr*, the famous annual Muslim festival being held today, marks the breaking of the fast, that is, 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.

After refraining from food and drink during the day for a month, now we have returned to our usual eating and drinking since this morning. Food is mentioned numerous 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 our fellow-beings* and *not eating brings us closer to God*. Both are equally important to achieve. The Quran repeatedly describes Muslims as “those who believe and do good”. Believing is our relationship with God and doing good deeds is our relationship with our fellow-beings, and more generally with everything around us.

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 enjoy 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. As quoted at the beginning of this *khutba*, the Quran says: “Say: Who has forbidden the adornment (*zīnat*) of Allah, which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good provisions (*ṭayyibāti min-ar-rizq*)? 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, and foods of this life for the physical well-being of man. Notice the qualification *ṭayyibāt* (“good”) before “provisions” (*rizq*). Also, in the verse before this one, all humanity, called “the children of Adam”, is addressed with this advice: “...eat and drink and do not be extravagant; surely He (God) does not love the extravagant.” (7:31).

No one can forbid the use of the pleasing things of this world 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 will 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 temporary physical and bodily pleasure gain nothing permanent from them. Bodily pleasures and spiritual pleasures are mentioned together in a hadith in Bukhari about fasting. The Holy Prophet said:

“The person who fasts has two pleasures which he enjoys: when he breaks the fast he is pleased, and when he will meet His Lord (in the hereafter) he will be pleased because of his fasting.” (hadith 1904)

When the fast ends every day, the person fasting experiences the bodily pleasure of eating and drinking, and of course when the whole month of fasting ends, we can experience at any time of the day the bodily pleasures which we denied to ourselves. This pleasure is felt regardless of whether our fasting was merely ritual or done in its true sense and spirit. But those who fasted in the true sense will have pleasure of it in the hereafter as well. This is not by Allah saying to such a person: You fasted, so here is your reward. It is because fasting will have led him or her to do good deeds in this life, and fasting will have brought that person nearer to Allah in this life, and this he will see in the next life as a meeting with the Lord.

The Quran not only tells us what not to eat but also 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)

“Lawful” or *ḥalāl* here does not only mean what we hear of as being *ḥalāl* food, that is to say, food products which Muslims are permitted to consume. It also means food acquired through lawful earning of money. This is why the verse warns against following the footsteps of the devil. Obtaining money through any kind of false means is to follow in the footsteps of the devil. Then whatever is bought with it, including food to eat, is unlawful and not *ḥalāl*.

Shortly after this verse, addressing Muslims the Quran 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). I read this out at the beginning. Mentioning here only “good things” means that all good things are allowed to Muslims to eat. This is clearly stated at the beginning of chapter 5 in two verses:

“They ask you (O Prophet) as to what is allowed them. Say: The good things (*tayyibāt*) are allowed to you...” (5:4) and “This day good things (*tayyibāt*) are made lawful for you...” (5:5)

So all good things are lawful or *ḥalāl*. This means that whatever has been forbidden to Muslims to consume is not for some arbitrary or mysterious reason, but because the thing is not good. As to forbidden foods, the verse after 2:172, which I quoted above beginning “O you who believe, eat of the good things...”, is as follows:

“He has forbidden you **only** what dies of itself, and blood, and the flesh of swine, and that on which any other name than that of Allah has been invoked. Then whoever is driven by necessity, not desiring, nor exceeding the limit, no sin is upon him. Surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (2:173).

Notice here the word “only”. It means that what is forbidden is limited to what is specified directly as being forbidden while everything else is allowed. The verse also adds that in case of unavoidable necessity a person may make limited and temporary use of something which is forbidden, and Allah will forgive him. There is a similar passage elsewhere in the Quran: “So eat of what Allah has given you, lawful and good (things), and give thanks for Allah’s favour, if He it is you serve. He has forbidden you **only** what dies of itself and blood and the flesh of swine and that on which any other name than that of Allah has been invoked; but whoever is driven to (it), not desiring nor exceeding the limit, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (16:114–115).

Not only twice, but the same two ideas are mentioned a third time in the Quran.

“Say: I do not find in what is revealed to me **anything forbidden** for an eater to eat of, except if it is what dies of itself, ... (etc.)” (6:145)

It is stated here even more clearly that nothing is forbidden except what is listed here. And in the well-known long verse in which God says that “This day have I perfected for you your religion”, which was revealed only about three months before the Holy Prophet’s death, foods forbidden to consume are described at the beginning of the verse. And the verse ends as follows: “But whoever is compelled by hunger, not inclining wilfully to sin, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (5:3). It can be seen from this that Islam is not dogmatic, rigid, stern and a hard taskmaster in what it

prohibits, but it is pragmatic, realistic and understanding.

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)

There can be several interpretations of what is meant by “there is no blame for what they eat” on the believers, as long as they keep their duty and do good deeds. One may be as follows. In religions generally, and in many religious movements within religions, it is thought that to reach the highest level of righteousness you need to shun and reject luxuries, indulgences and expensive things completely, and subsist on the simplest and most basic necessities in your daily life. So eating some rare delicacy or expensive food is considered as contrary to leading a holy life. But Islam does not accept that view. There is no blame on believers for what they eat. Of course, if a believer is eating lavish food and having banquets on ill-gotten gains or by misusing public funds, or to purely satisfy his greed, or to impress people with his wealth, that is certainly prohibited, not only in Islam but by any good moral standards. But to enjoy the best of food, and indeed wear the best of clothes, and live well, while remaining within legal and moral limits, is no bar to being at the same time a righteous person.

Another interpretation may be that if a believer inadvertently or unknowingly consumes something which is not allowed in Islam, or perhaps simply thinks that he might have done so, they are free of any blame. It doesn't require any repentance. Yet another interpretation may relate to all those discussions among Muslims regarding one food or another, as to whether it is allowed in Islam or not. People go into minute details of its composition in case it might contain the slightest trace of some ingredient which is unlawful, or perhaps something lawful has been served to them using an implement which might have been used earlier to serve something not allowed in Islam but was not thoroughly washed after that, etc. This verse gives us to understand

that to believe and do good is more important than spending time and energy analysing food in the most minute detail or worrying or conjecturing if something was lawful to eat or not. Just make a broad judgment in such matters. 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 in fact can never be resolved. It is a question of prioritisation, putting things in order of importance.

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 we entreat and beseech 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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