

FAITH ON THE PLATE: RELIGIOUS FOOD REGULATIONS IN JUDAISM AND ISLAM

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Abstract

The role being played by food in the existence of man cannot be over-emphasized. Food is highly necessary to carry out the functions of the body in terms of health and growth. This study therefore aimed at examining dietary constraints as recorded in the scriptures in relation to the Jews and the Muslims religion. To this extent, man seems to give special priority to his diet in his life's programmers. Though, food is essential and needed by man for his survival, yet, not every food is good for human consumption. The importance attached to food by man explains why choice of food is relevant to growth. Consequently, Yahweh, as recorded in the Old Testament gave the Jews some regulations which would guide them against their diet consumption. Hence, it was concluded that since what we eat has no effect on God in terms of health and wellbeing but on us human beings, it is therefore advisable for man to eat what will benefit him and not what endanger his health. Man, regardless of his religion and status should abhor and jettison impurity in its totality.

Keywords: Dietary, Judaism, Islam, Restriction

INTRODUCTION

As observed by Joseph (1996), food has been scientifically defined as: "something good to eat which could be in liquid, semi-solid and solid forms and are necessary to carry out the life functions of the body". Food has also been described by others as "any substance, liquid or solid, which provides the body with minerals." Diet, as submitted by some people, depends more on social class than on locality. The culture of different people therefore affects the kind of food they are accustomed to. The taboos and superstitions regarding certain foods such as eggs, pork and also the number of meals eaten is determined by the people's custom. The Jewish Priests were restricted to certain diet because of their status. Allah, because of his holiness, also frowns at anything associated with defilement. The Muslims are therefore forbidden from eating foods that can defile (Mohammad, 2000). It can be rightly maintained that man's health depends largely on the type of food he takes since each type of food contains different kinds of necessary substance and nutrient values grouped into what is called the six classes of food namely: proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, fat and oil and water. In view of this, the Holy Bible declares: "food is for the belly and belly for food" (I Corinthians 6:13). The Holy Qur'an also says: "Eat and drink in health" "Eat and drink of that which Allah has provided" (Q.52:19;2:60). The importance of the above quotations lies in the role being played by foods and its connection with health. It is a fact that cannot be disputed that there are certain foods which are not good for human consumption as they are bad and impure. The good foods are those that contain nutrient values and are hygienic. Even though man's diet is very essential and

despite the fact that God himself gives His approval, yet, he frowns at impure diet. The Holy Bible states clearly that: "The gentiles who turned to God should abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from blood" (Act 15:19-20) It is also recorded in the Bible that:

If any animal of which you eat dies, he who touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. And he who eats of its carcass shall wash his clothes and the unclean (Leviticus 11:39-40). From the above quotation, it is obvious that the Jews have stringent dietary constraints (Wright, 1999). The glorious Qur'an also says: "He has only forbidden you, dead meat and blood and the flesh of swine" (Q.2:73). The two holy books as we have seen emphasize the same truth, that man cannot eat whatever comes on his way, this study is therefore an attempt to examine the dietary constraints with special reference to the Jews and the Muslims as recorded in the holy books.

DIETARY REGULATIONS IN ISLAM

The word 'Islam' originally emanated from the Arabic word: "sin-la-min" which literally means to make peace or become reconciled with one another. The word also means to surrender, to submit, to yield, to resign oneself to something or somebody. On the basis of the original Arabic word; "sin-min", Islam has come to be defined in various ways by various classes of people (Rosander and David, 1997). Islam, from the religious point of view, derived its concept implication from available shades of meaning as an absolute submission to God, His will and commandments. It is an unflinching submission to, or resignation of oneself to absolute command of Allah willingly in whatever circumstance one finds himself. In Islam, the authority of Allah is unconditional. By implication, the existence and supremacy of Allah is recognized on one hand and the sustenance of man by him is equally admitted on another hand. The realization of the relationship of man to God is the basis of the devotion and submission. It indicates that man has identified his will with the will of God and has subjected at least, as far as he is concerned completely in accordance with the divine will. Man therefore upholds what is lawful and avoids those things that are divinely detested or prohibited. It is on this basis that we shall examine dietary regulations in Islam. The effect of food and drink on the body and temperament cannot be overemphasized, the physicians, always prescribe special diet for patients, so that indiscriminate diet may not injure them the more. The Almighty Allah being fully aware that soundness of the body is good for man prescribes certain food that can make him enjoy sound health and prohibits certain diets that are inimical and injurious to his health. Sura 6:145 says:

"I find nothing in what has been revealed to me, any (meat) forbidden to be eaten by one who wished to eat it, except carrion, blood poured forth, or swine flesh, for it is unclear, or any meat that has been consecrated to anyone other than Allah, for it is an abomination, but he who is forced (then to) neither craving nor transgressing (will be excused) for Allah is forgiving and merciful".

We can therefore infer from the above quotation that carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and others which have been dedicated to any other than Allah are prohibited in Islam. We shall now consider the forbidden foods as stated in the above quotation one after the other. **Carrion:** Carrion can be described as dead animal which has not been slaughtered according to Islamic law. It can therefore be in form of the following:

" Animal killed by strangulation

" Animal killed by beating

"Animal killed by falling from a height "Animal that has been gored to death

" Animal devoured by wild beasts (Basher and Mohamed, 1988)

Cognizance must be given to the fact that for prohibiting the above is for the benefit of man because naturally man resents carrion and considers it unhygienic. It might have died from a dangerous disease or from eating poisonous food; the consumption might therefore be injurious to man's health. In fact, medical experts have submitted that consumption of carrion can cause ill-health like stomach disorder, diarrhea, cholera and even gastro enteritis or a plague (Balogun, 1988). Apart from the above effect, consumption of carrion is not without religious implications. A Muslim that eats carrion feels uncomfortable because he is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt. It is therefore advisable for Muslims to always eat the meat of slaughtered animals.

Bloods: According to Islamic law, blood is also prohibited. It has been scientifically proved that animal's blood contains a lot of impure and waste materials. The blood carries organism that are responsible for various diseases which can cause sub-clinical infections. Eating such means consumption of the disease it contains. This might be inimical to man's health. It is probable that Allah forbids man most especially the Muslims from eating blood because of the potential danger in contacting such diseases.

Flesh of swine: Since swine eats garbage and impure things, its meat is impure in Islam. Scientific experiments have proved that swine carries certain viruses that are injurious to human body and that no matter how perfect the method being used for cooking its meat, some viruses will still remain in its flesh. The consumption of swine's flesh may cause (worm disease). It also contains saturated animal fat which can lead to increase in glycerol which in turn narrows the artery and can lead to hypertension and heart failure which can lead to untimely or premature death. The flesh of swine is therefore not recommended as food by Allah. In Islam, that which has been dedicated has been to any other than Allah is prohibited. That means it is prohibited to eat the flesh of animals over which names other than Allah's have been invoked when slaughtered. The significance of the prohibition here is merely religious; it is to protect the oneness of Allah and to keep the faith pure. Since Allah has permitted man to slaughter the lawful animals, invoking his name when slaughtering is a matter of declaration that the slaughtering is done with his permission (Martin, 1976). **Alcoholic Drink:** The Holy Qur'an describes alcohol as both useful and harmful, but quickly adds that its harm is greater than its usefulness, there is also a scientific proof that corroborates the positive side of alcoholic drink. However, it has also been proved that alcohol also causes liver fibrosis, hallucination and impotence. Since the disadvantages of alcohol are more than its usefulness and since Qur'an refers to it as sin, it is therefore forbidden.

The case of necessity: One is permitted to eat prohibited food whenever he finds himself in circumstances that are beyond his control. When there is starvation that can lead to death or suffering for at least twenty-four hours with nothing else to eat except prohibited food, one is expected to eat moderate quantity of such prohibited food, to keep him from danger of death (Adeleke, 1973). Concerning the animals that are about

to die as a result of falling from a height, or being beaten, strangled, gored or attacked by a wild animal, the flesh of such may be lawful if they are slaughtered while still alive. In case of carrion, dead fish, sea animals and locusts are lawful. It has been argued that the prophet (peace be upon him) ate from whale flesh. It is not also forbidden to eat liver, spleen, lungs and kidney. However, it must be noted that for an animal to be fit for human consumption, it must be slaughtered. The animal must not be allowed to suffer before it is killed, the name of Allah must be recited directly before using the knife with the formula (Allah Akbal) "Allah is the greatest". We must however note that Islam, in order to strengthen its relationship with the people of the scriptures (the Christians and the Jews) makes their (the people of the scripture) food lawful for Muslims. Muslims are allowed to eat from the food of the Christians and the Jews, unless it is prohibited by Islamic law. Hence, in order to strengthen their relationship with the Moslems, they must equally eat for food of the moslems. It must be noted that in the strictest sense of christianity, all things created by God is for the good of man and may be used as food at any time with due reverence to Him the creator.

DIETARY REGULATIONS IN JUDAISM

Judaism is the religion, doctrine, rites and customs of the Jews. Although the term Judaism specifically refers to the religion of the ancient Hebrews, tribes of Judah, it has come to conote the entire culture of the Jewish people. Judaism arose among the Hebrews, a northern semitic group of tribes. It was characterized by animism and worship of the sun and deities. The religion became monotheistic, however, by the acceptance of Yahweh the God of the patriarchs, (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,) as the one true God called Jehovah. The monotheistic aspect of Judaism was symbolized by a covenant, or contract, in which Yahweh promised the Hebrews his protection in return for their worship of Him as the only true God. The original covenant between Yahweh and Abraham (Genesis 17) confirmed by the making of circumcision, was reiterated to Moses on Mount Sinai and confirms there by the receiving of the divine law, known as the Decalogue or Ten Commandments (Malcom, 1998). When the Hebrew tribes (subsequently known as Israelites) conquered Canaan, they imbibed the culture of the people, such as the sacrificial customs and seasonal festivities intended to placate their deity. Belief in evil spirits, adherence to dietary regulations, the practice of death rites and the rite of circumcision, the myth of creation and the flood, the legends of Cain, Esau, and the patriarch were incorporated into other ancient religion of the Middle East. What set Judaism apart of human beings, the sacredness of the family unit and unswerving loyalty to God are part of its characteristics. Judaism has been one of the most important factors in the development of modern civilization, not only through its direct influence on its followers but also its role in the development of Christianity. Christianity inherited the concept of monotheism, prayer liturgies, and the concept of the Sabbath. The most important of these is the fact that Judaism remains the basis of Christian ethics (Colin, 1997). Judaism has direct influence on the Muslims. The mosques, for instance, are similar to the Jewish synagogues and there are similarities in Judaic custom of prayer services and that of the Muslims. According to the Holy Bible the priests have a more stringent dietary. While the flesh of pure animals that have not been properly slaughtered causes uncleanness, the meat may still be eaten by the strangers. The

Jews were given specific instructions not to eat any abominable thing (Deuteronomy 14:3). The bible vividly summarizes the right foods to be eaten by them as follows:

These are the beasts which ye shall eat: the ox, the sheep, and the goat, the hart and the roebuck, and the fallow deer, and the wild goat and the pygard, and the wild ox, and the chamois. And every beast that parteth the hoof and cleaveth the cleft into claws, and cheweth the cud among the beast, that ye shall eat (Deuteronomy 14:4-6) The reason for this restriction is stated in Leviticus 11:44. Yahweh is holy there is therefore need for them to be holy. So, the Jews are to eat "whatsoever parteth the hoof and is cloven footed and cheweth the cud (Wilbur, 2000). As regard the animal living in the sea, the bible says: These shall ye eat of all that are in waters: whatsoever hath fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers them shall ye eat (Leviticus 11:9). It further states: Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth: even these of them ye may eat: the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind; and the beetle after his kind, and the grass-hopper after his kind (Leviticus 11:21-22). It must however be emphasized that all other animals that are not among the above lists are abominable in Judaistic custom. "They shall be even an abomination unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, but ye shall have their carcasses in abomination" (Leviticus 11:11). Just as it is in Islam, Yahweh, also frowns at carrion. This is recorded in Leviticus 11:39 "And if any beast of which ye may eat, die; he that touched the carcass shall be unclean until the evening." From the above, we can see that the Jews are prohibited from eating animals killed by strangulation, animals killed by falling from a height, and those devoured by wild beasts, Any man that eats carrion shall remain unclean and this is at variance with Yahweh's injunction that says "Be ye holy for I am holy" (Chaim, 1977). Apart from carrion, Yahweh also warns: "Only be sure that thou eat not blood: for the blood is life: and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh" (Deuteronomy 12:23; Act 15:20) . The reason for this abstinence is stated in Deuteronomy 12:25; "...that it may go well with thee, and with the children after thee..." We can therefore infer from the above dietary restrictions and regulations that Yahweh is keenly interested in the welfare of his people. He wants them to live long as it is only balanced diets that can make them achieve this, He wants to prosper them and their children and above all, He wants them to abstain from every defilement so that they can be holy as He (Yahweh) is.

DIETARY REGULATIONS IN ISLAM AND JUDAISM

A critical examination of Dietary regulations reveals that almighty Allah or Yahweh knows that soundness of mind depends on soundness of the body. He therefore prohibits man from taking diets that may be injurious to his health. In Islam, as it is revealed in this work, there seems to be exceptions from prohibited things. Man for instance is permitted to eat prohibited food in the case of starvation if there is no alternative. He is allowed to eat the amount that will keep him from the danger of death. Such an exception seems not to exist in Judaism. Both Islam and Judaism teach that carrion is inimical to man's health and should not be consumed by him. Having understood that animal's blood contains a lot of impure and waste materials, the consumption of which may be injurious to health, there is a strict prohibition on its consumption in both Islam and Judaism. Consequently, if man is permitted to eat prohibited foods in time

of starvation, then it is not out of place to say that nothing is prohibited to eat since they are not poisonous considering the global economic recession. Meanwhile, Islam and Judaism lawful food may become unlawful if acquired illegally. Judaism teaches that man is commanded to wash himself with water as a result of his defilement by consuming prohibited food. The idea of washing oneself with water after being defiled is not taught in Islam. The Muslims are only expected to wash certain parts of the body before prayers. This act is what is referred to as ablution.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it has been established that for the body to carry out its life functions in terms of health and growth, food is highly needed. What man eats therefore determines his health condition because he depends on food for his survival. As recorded in the Scriptures, God is aware of the necessity of food and the role being played by it in the life of man. He therefore commands: "Eat and drink in health..." "Eat and drink of that which Allah has provided..." (Q.52:19; 2:60); "Food is for the belly..." (I Corinthians 6:13). Even though, man's diet is very essential and God Himself gives his approval, His people are forbidden from eating impure foods. God frowns at impure diet. It has been scientifically proved that not every food can benefit the body. Scientific experiments have shown that consumption of swine's flesh for instance may cause trichinosis (worm disease) in the body which can eventually lead to pre-mature death. Cognizance must therefore be given to the fact that whatever man eats whether pure or impure cannot make God to grow or make Him to be healthy. Dietary regulations and restrictions are therefore given for the good of man. Whatever we eat has no effect on Him; it is therefore advisable for man to eat what will benefit him and not what endanger his health. Man, regardless of his religion and status should abhor and jettison impurity in its totality.

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