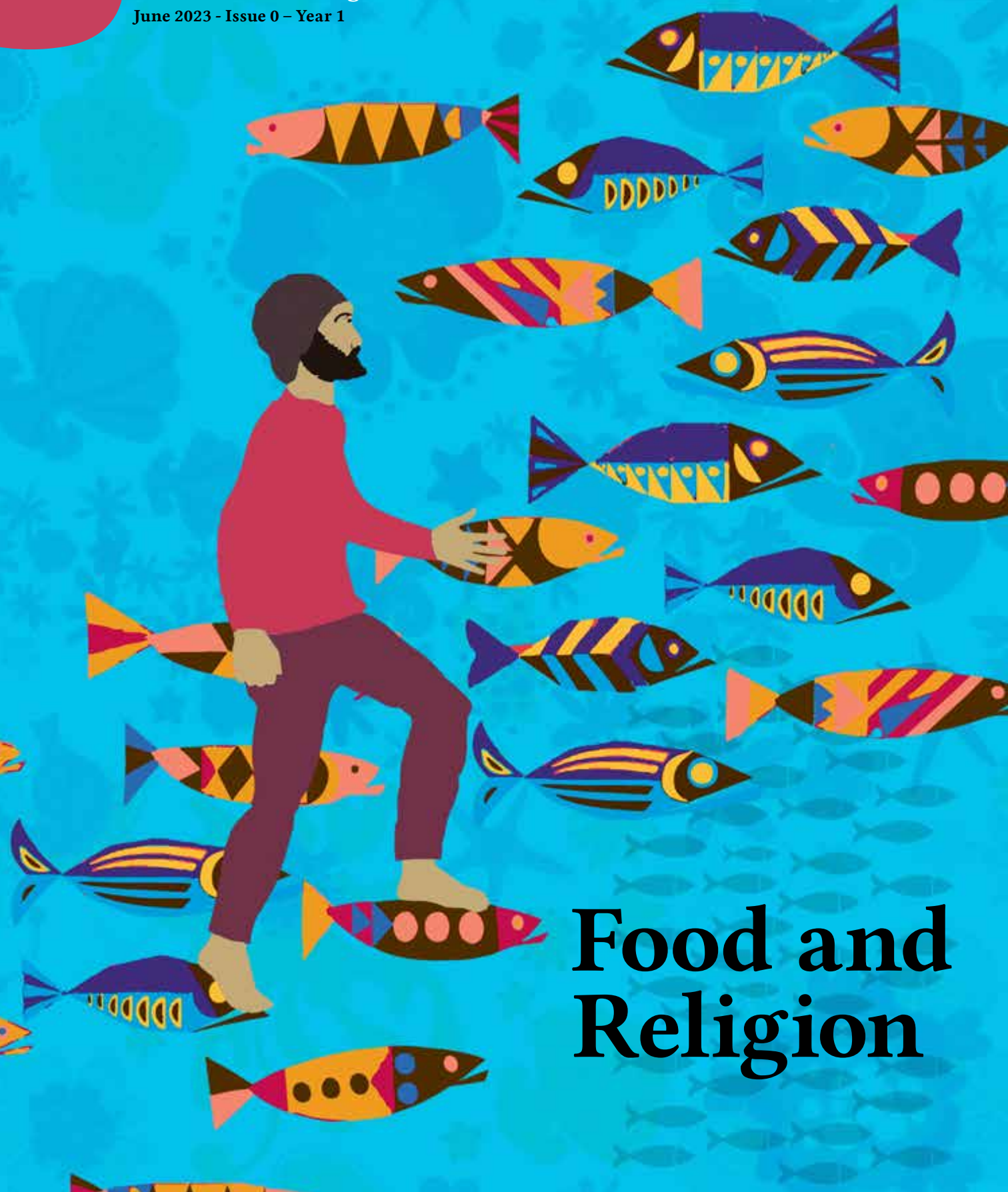
jusur

An intercultural magazine

June 2023 - Issue 0 – Year 1



Food and Religion

Coming in the ne

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Editor-in-Chief:
Wael Farouq

Editorial board:
Alessandro Banfi
Amr Khafagy
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Youssef Rakha

Collaborators:
Elisa Ferrero
Marianna Massa
Omar Nakhla
Pia De Simone

Graphic design and layout:
Khaled Soliman Alnassiry

Distribution:

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A message from the Editor-in-chief

A Bridge to the Future

***Wael Farouq** is professor of Arabic language and culture at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan (Italy) and author of many publications in the field of Arab-Islamic studies.*

No culture exists that lacks a heart beating with the love of God. And among every people, in every language and every school of political or economic thought, the Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, is present in some form with his sacred message. The Muslim World League is thus by definition a home for every people, language, culture and school of thought. But, since its Secretary General, Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, is keen on the League embracing human plurality in its fullness, he strives to make it an inclusive space for every religion. In the shade of that enormous canopy believers of all faiths can show and share what they find true, good and beautiful in what they believe.

It was through this understanding that Jusur was born: a melting pot of all the elements that make up humanity, which offers us cultural models of shared human values in which we find ourselves united despite our different religious beliefs. 'Jusur' is an Arabic word in the plural form. Its root's multiple meanings traces a surprising and exemplary path for the dialogue to which we aspire. The verb 'jasara' means 'to go away' and 'to pass through,' while the noun 'jasaara' means 'boldness' and 'bravery of heart.' As for the word 'jisr' (singular of 'Jusur'), it is the 'bridge.' The meaning of 'going away' and 'passing through' reflects our determination to open up new horizons, a task that requires arming ourselves with the second meaning of the word: bravery of heart. If this path is completed, the third meaning of the word is realized, because the person becomes a bridge, a link between two worlds: the world of the present in which we live and the world of the future to which we aspire.

This is how this word was chosen: we see this magazine as a road to take together to the future. And so its doors are open to everyone, no one excluded, not so much for the sake of a dialogue that may end in agreement or disagreement, but in order to lay the foundation stones of a future that unites us in all our rich differences.

Nothing more than food unites humanity in its plurality, because while we all need it regardless of where we come from or who we are, the cultural and religious manifestations related to eating are so varied that many thinkers see them as the fundamental signs of identity, both of individuals and communities. If we go beyond the outward rituals of eating or abstaining from food and we consider their meanings, their essence, it turns out religion sees food as a positive driver for doing good. Islam, for example, links food to the purpose of life and how it is lived. It is not enough for food to be licit; it must also be 'good' in terms of how it is obtained, i.e. it must be procured in such a way that it does not cause harm to anyone.

Our hope is that this first issue will demonstrate three qualities: the specificity of each identity, the rich diversity of different identities, and a clear idea of how we might reform the present in the hope of moving towards a better future.

Editorial

Tauran, Builder of Bridges: From Tolerance to Testimony

By Muhammad bin Abdul-Karim Al-Issa

I like to call my late friend Cardinal Tauran 'Builder of Bridges,' because his life was a constant effort to turn any given contradiction into two sides of a river, indispensable to each other.

The first bridge he built was in the space of his own self, between the abstractions of theology and philosophy, in which he earned his doctorate on the one hand, and his immersion in the daily life of the elderly and the young he came across in his diocese on the other.

There also was the isolation of the Vatican Library and its archive, of which he was the custodian, incessant meetings in the four corners of the earth to lead Vatican diplomacy, with his career culminating in a step towards the implementation of the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council to be open to other religions, especially Islam, as president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Since our first meeting, I've felt a special closeness with him that went beyond the friendship and mutual respect required by our formal positions as officials and religious leaders; perhaps because of the similarity of our journeys, despite the deep differences between our cultural and religious backgrounds.

I too studied Islamic doctrine and specialized in Islamic jurisprudence, which mainly aims to simplify Islamic teachings from divine abstraction to ways they can be embodied in the daily life of ordinary individuals. I practiced it as a judge, then as a minister of justice, before assuming the secretariat of the Muslim World League under the difficult circumstances our world has been experiencing for decades.

Jean-Louis Tauran

To date, I have made openness to other religions and cultures a priority for religious and intellectual leaders who are members of the Muslim World League, and I have spared no effort in the attempt to achieve this on the ground.

Perhaps the second reason for our closeness was our common awareness of the difficult challenge faced by dialogue today, both within a given religion and between religions.

These people are divided into two camps. The first camp champions the clash between stereotypes, whose sacred mission is the exclusion of the other, of difference, using violence and murder if necessary, as exemplified by terrorists who falsely identify themselves to Islam, or by the far right, which calls for the expulsion of migrants to let them die at sea. Some among them may also carry weapons and shoot worshipers in mosques, as has happened in Denmark and New Zealand.

The second camp champions dialogue between stereotypes, which seeks to avoid confrontation and violence, believing that, for the sake of dialogue and coexistence, "it is necessary to overcome differ-

River Banks

We live in the era of big data, where many people resort to stereotypes to understand a post-truth world in which information and images flow without constraint.

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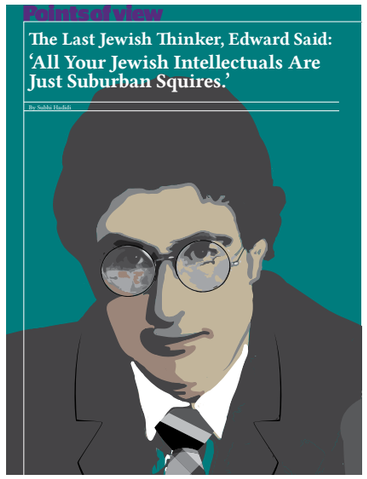

Points of view

The Last Jewish Thinker, Edward Said: 'All Your Jewish Intellectuals Are Just Suburban Squires.'

By Subhi Hadidi

Tauran, Builder of Bridges: From Tolerance to Testimony

By Muhammad bin Abdul-Karim Al-Issa

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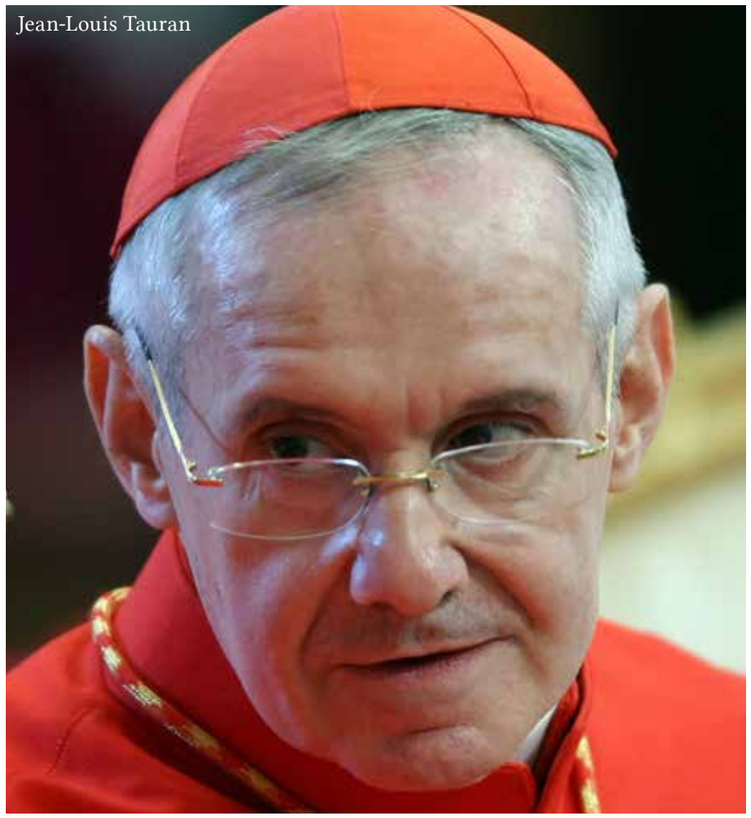

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The second camp champions dialogue between stereotypes, which seeks to avoid confrontation and violence, believing that, for the sake of dialogue and coexistence, "it is necessary to overcome differences and diversities that distinguish one culture from another," which means excluding difference itself.

And so we live in a world that practices exclusion. This culture has emptied words such as tolerance of their meaning. I may not respect the culture of others; I may even hate others and there would be no blame as long as I am able to tolerate their existence and their difference. I may even turn a completely blind eye to their existence as though they were invisible creatures whose presence is felt but not known.

This too is a form of tolerance that is acceptable to many, but in my opinion, it is a poisonous tolerance that hides a sense of pride and racial, cultural, or religious superiority.

These contemporary forms of tolerance contradict the central concept of 'witnessing' in the Abrahamic religions. Bearing testimony is mainly motivated by the awareness of our differences and our love for them; a love and understanding that we cannot live in the absence of the other. Bearing testimony differs from tolerance in that it requires the presence of the self as much as it requires the presence of the other.

The Three Abrahamic Religions

In the three Abrahamic religions, love is closely linked to faith. God addresses his worshipers by saying that 'he loves them, and they love him.' Many verses in the holy Quran confirm God's love for believers — a love that embraces all areas of their life. The Almighty said, 'God loves the patient,' and 'God loves the virtuous,' as well as 'God loves the pious.' In a Hadith, God says, 'No one of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.' In the Bible, it is written, 'If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.' It is also written: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'

Cardinal Tauran liked to repeat these verses of the English poet William Blake:

I sought my soul,
But my soul I couldn't see,
I sought my God,
But my God eluded me,
I sought my brother,
And I found all three.

I felt a special closeness with him that went beyond the friendship and mutual respect required by our formal positions as officials and religious leaders.

In Tauran's view, dialogue presupposes complementarity between listening and speaking. Listening implies an inner attitude shaped by acceptance, attention, and respect. Listening presupposes an inner silence that allows understanding of what the other is saying. Speaking must be modulated by loyalty, openness, and humility.

The encounter between believers — conceived and achieved in this way — becomes a source of mutual enrichment for those who practice it, contributing to the harmony of societies.

'For this reason — for us believers — interreligious dialogue is not only a challenge but above all an opportunity to be seized. It can help us move from the search for humanity through cooperation in community building to the potential discovery of truth in our walking together and witnessing.'

These words, pronounced by Cardinal Tauran, confirm that we were united not only by a common academic and practical background nor by the responsibility to build bridges in a troubled world, nor by the challenge of confronting stereotypes and prejudices but, more importantly, by the desire and need for a new form of dialogue that transcends the closed rooms and closed hearts of religious leaders to the spaciousness of communities and cultures.

We were united by a vision that can achieve this: love, faith, bearing testimony, and friendship.

Our celebration of Cardinal Tauran in this issue of 'Jusur' is not just a celebration of the memory of a dear friend; it is an attempt to open a new horizon for this vision and this new approach to dialogue.

We are here today presenting Cardinal Tauran to our readers, because — following the approach of the Holy Quran — we compete to be better, and we renew our testimony to experience every new encounter with the amazement of children, the enthusiasm of the young, and the wisdom of the elderly.

Muhammad bin Abdul-Karim Al-Issa *is the secretary-general of the World Muslim League.*

The Dossier

Food and Religion

Context Specific:
How Religious Norms Impact Societies

By Olivier Roy

Preachers and theologians, at least in the monotheistic religions, consider respect for religious norms a tool for salvation. They also stress the need to combine those norms with pure and good intentions rather than just putting up a righteous or conformist facade. Salvation is not collective — it is an individual path.

But some norms have a collective dimension because they draw a visible line between those who respect them and those who do not. When a community of people within a given society respects specific norms of behavior — concerning food, say — this will inevitably have a social impact.

In a global, multicultural context, respecting religious norms raises concerns from a sociological, cultural, and even political perspective. At such levels, individual motives and intentions are not taken into account; what matters is the collective choice and its impact on society.

What are the sociological consequences of the call to respect religious norms in the public sphere? It creates a more or less visible boundary between believers of different creeds and secularists. It also creates a specific economic market and may raise an issue of conflict of rights.

Take the dietary norms of kosher and halal. In a society where believers are supposed to be the majority, religious norms apply more or less to anybody. In Cairo or Casablanca, meat is supposed to be halal. Eating such food is not an act of faith. It is embedded in the local culture, and everybody eats halal without thinking about it.

But in a context where believers are the minority, and moreover in the middle of a different culture — like Jews and Muslims in Europe — eating halal or kosher has an impact on society and raises controversial issues. First, it constrains individuals to make a personal choice: should I eat like everybody else, or should I abide by the norms of my faith, making it visible to others? It supposes that believers look specifically for halal or kosher food, go to specific shops, and set explicit and clear boundaries for what is religiously lawful.

Religious norms must be made explicit because they are no longer embedded in the local culture. Nevertheless, they are no more the expression of a pristine foreign culture; second- and third-generation Muslims in the West do not consider themselves a diaspora reclaiming another culture. They want to be accepted as believing citizens, not strangers.

The concept of multi-culturalism is not compatible with specific religious demands; converts want 'the true religion,' not another culture. Many second generations might fight against racism, what is more, while not really caring about religious norms.

Liberals and Rigorists

What do kosher and halal exactly mean in a 'deculturated' context? The debate taking place among believers lies on a spectrum between two poles: the liberal, which is just to avoid meat in general; and the rigorist one, which produces lengthy treaties on what is edible and what is not.

Through this process, the community that requests or demands access to religiously acceptable commodities becomes visible as a religious community in the eyes of the rest of society, especially when food regulations go along with a specific dress code (hijab, say). This new visibility may open the door to tensions and conflicts.

This quest for religiously acceptable food entails the progressive setting up of a specific market. Such a market, of course, presupposes investment, benefits, and regulations. There might be competition not only between entrepreneurs but also between controllers of norms.

It is no longer a matter of individual faith and private religious practice. Believers ask for specific rights in the public sphere, say specifically adapted menus in state schools and institutions. The state is necessarily involved; it has to regulate the new religious market to allow or ban specific menus for religious minorities in schools and to deal with the inevitable politicization of the resulting religious-freedom controversies.

This is the paradox of the secular state: by trying to manage and control purely religious demands, it gives more visibility to religion.

The higher visibility of religion also has another consequence. It raises the issue of conflicts of rights. Defenders of animal rights in northern Europe, for example, want to ban ritual slaughtering. Of course, some Islamophobes jump on the pro-animal bandwagon just to put pressure on the Muslim or Jewish communities, but most animal defenders are sincere in their view of animals as sentient beings. There is a clear conflict between animal rights and religious freedom. How do you solve it?

In the end that will depend on what we take to be religious freedom. Such freedom is recognized in many countries and constitutions but with diverging applications. In most Middle Eastern countries, religious freedom protects the rights of a minority — usually Christian or Jewish — but is not defined as an individual right (which for instance would allow an individual to convert from a religion to another religion or to be an atheist).

In Europe, conversely, freedom of religion is seen as an individual right, not a collective one. The consequence is that in the Middle East, you may be seen as a member of a religious community even if you do not believe, while in Europe you can claim a religious right only if you believe and you can prove that your claim to a right is based on a core tenet of your faith which does not too openly contradict the law of your country of residence or citizenship. Polygamy may be a right in Islam but is never a duty, so it cannot be allowed under the label of religious freedom in the West.

And yet who decides what is required by a given religion? With the Catholic Church, there is little debate: the Pope has the last word. For instance, Pope Benedict did not hesitate to address the European Parliament about 'the non-negotiable principles' (i.e. refusal of abortion and same-sex marriage), even if he did not manage to influence the Parliament's decisions.

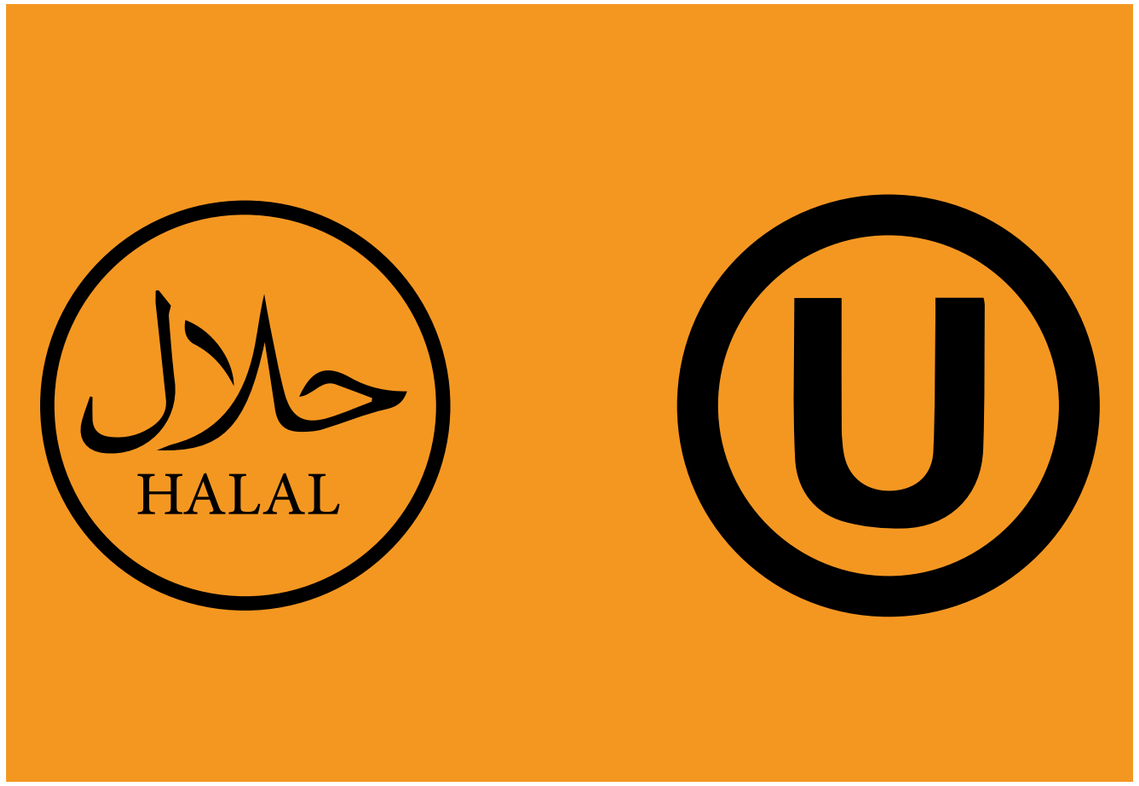
But what about Muslims, Jews, and Protestants, who do not have a centralized leadership? Many Western secular states like France and Austria try to set up a representative body of believers, which usually lacks legitimacy due to political interference.

The predicament of a secular state trying to regulate religious norms in the public sphere is how to reconcile the basic principle of separation of church and state and the need to take into account the specificity of purely religious demands. Whatever the diversity of the answers from various Western states, it is still a work in progress.

Olivier Roy *is a French Islamologist and political scientist. He is currently joint-chair at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and the Political and Social Sciences department at the European University Institute where he also he chairs the Mediterranean Program.*

A Dietary Prerogative: The Real Whys and Wherefores of Halal and Kosher

By Joseph H.H. Weiler



Although one reads endlessly about the Judeo-Christian tradition, the true sister religions in both their institutional structure and theology are Islam and Judaism as expressed in the centrality of Shariah and Halakha — the latter being set of legal norms of the Jewish tradition.

One of the perplexing similarities between the two faiths is the adherence to so-called table rules or halal and kosher diets. The rules are in some ways similar — absolute prohibition of certain meat products (pork) and insistence on rather similar slaughtering procedures for other meats.

In other ways, they are different: Muslims may not consume alcohol, whereas no such prohibition exists in Halakha. By contrast, observant Jews may not consume certain fish — notably sedentary shellfish — which Muslims are free to eat.

Both practices of halal and kosher are found, at best, to be perplexing (to be politically correct) to Christians and, at worst, arbitrary if not worse.

'Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man (Matthew 15:11)' sounds like reasonable and compelling theological logic after all.

So why do Muslims and Jews observe halal and kosher rules that seem so senseless from a theological perspective?

I will address the issue from a Jewish perspective but am reasonably confident that a similar, if not identical, logic would apply to Islam — of which my knowledge is more perfunctory.

Core Considerations: Identitarian, Social, Transcendent

The question why may be asked in a variety of ways, not unlike the question 'Why do people go to Mass?' It can be habit, social pressure, societal expectations, or any number of motives. That is not the inquiry of this essay.

From a religious point of view, there can be but one reason to keep halal and kosher: 'Because the Lord so demands.'

Do not seek, for example, any health benefits for such rules as a key to their observance or significance. One can observe a strictly halal or kosher diet that is atrociously unhealthy — fat-laden halal-kosher beef is just as unhealthy as fat-laden non-kosher meat.

Even if halal or kosher observance were found to provide some health benefit, it would be necessary to distinguish this benefit from the law's justification. The prohibition for Jews on driving or being driven on the Sabbath, forcing one to walk to the synagogue, may encourage exercise and thus have a health benefit.

But if I elect to walk to the synagogue for this reason, I would be negating the theological significance of Sabbath observance. I would make the observance of the Sabbath an act of service to myself instead of to the Almighty. The same is true for halal or kosher observance.

Looking, then, more carefully at Jewish observance, what difference does kosher observance make to the life of the Jewish homo religiosus other than irritating all those around you and denying yourself what are reputed to be some of the most delicious dishes, such as beluga caviar, cerdo iberico, pata negra, philly cheesesteak, chicken Kyiv, or endlessly wonderful wines?

Not that kosher observance means culinary deprivation – get yourself invited to a Jewish wedding and you'll see for yourself. Full disclosure: I observe kosher practices.

Instead of thinking of benefits, imagine an earlier period in the life of the Jewish people, when kosher observance was ubiquitous among Jews and relatively rigorous. It is obvious, and much commented on, that kosher would act as an impediment to one of the most common forms of sociality — sharing a table. In this sense, kosher caters to the age-old Jewish fear of assimilation.

One of the most famous statements in the gospel occurs in the Book of John when the Jewish leadership is plotting to put Jesus to death.

'If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: And the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation' (John 11:48).

Caiaphas, the Chief Priest who later presides over the Trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin as reported in Mark and Matthew states then in justification:

'Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not' (John 11:50).

What was it about the teaching of Jesus that threatened the survival of the entire nation? It was not his raising of Lazarus from the dead, inviting Roman fears that he might raise an entire army (a stupidity suggested by serious scholars).

No, in his conduct — not least but not only in sharing a table — Jesus was perceived as obliterating that part of the law: the divine Nomos – or Law – which had the effect of preserving the Jews as a distinct people with a distinct testimony and a distinct obligation before the Almighty. If they were no longer a distinct people as described and mandated in the Old Testament, they would have no right to a distinct existence within the Roman Empire.

Paul understood this point perfectly and articulated it elegantly when he stated: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). If Jesus were followed by all Jews, that would be the end of the Jewish people.

Still more interesting is the effect of kosher observance today. Here, the exclusionary effect operates not just between Jew and gentile, but among Jews. A kosher-observing Jew will have the same difficulty sharing a table with a non-observant Jew as he or she would with a gentile.

In fact, the problem is much more painful and embarrassing. This does not strongly afflict the ultra-Orthodox, who have the same disinclination to mingle with non-observant Jews as with gentiles. But what about the so-called Modern Orthodox — those who continue to observe kosher but want to take part in modern life and socialize fully with non-Jews and non-observant Jews?

Many of you on 'the receiving end' will have experienced such questions as 'Is it OK if I only eat salad?' And in my experience, many religiously committed Christians will graciously anticipate this by seeking guidance in advance. It is nothing short of heart-warming.

But the most striking effect of kosher observance today is its challenge to secularism. In contemporary Western society, many religious persons — Muslim, Christian, and Jew — are reluctant to advertise their religious commitments in public. In many contexts, outward religiosity is regarded as backward, ill-mannered, or at least awkward.

I recall a colleague of mine — one of the most distinguished jurists of our age — buttonholing me in a corridor and asking: 'Weiler, how can such an intelligent person as yourself (the flattery always comes before the knife is stuck in) be religious?'

He then sweetened the pill by adding: 'Come to think of it, most

of my most intelligent friends are religious.'

Kosher observance in today's world combats the tendency among the religious to hide in the closet, to live as secular Marranos. A yarmulke (the circular headdress for men) or a sheitel (the wig for married women) or a Star of David can identify a man or woman as a Jew. But kosher observance forces engagement with significant religious commitment rather than mere identity.

For many, monotheism means simply the worship of one god instead of many. But for the initiated, monotheism signifies much more than the oneness of the Lord. It signifies his transcendent nature as well. Belief in the sun as the one and only god is monotheistic. It is not transcendent and is thus idolatrous.

The transcendent God is neither a stone nor a river, neither the sun nor the moon. He is not of this world. We can only say what he is not. In the Old Testament's view, when we try to describe a god with human, material imagery, and allusion, we inadvertently — if, limited by our humanity as we are, necessarily — compromise his transcendence.

The problem is immediately apparent. The Abrahamic God is also the god of love: a love that flows (or is meant to flow) in both directions between God and humans. How can one experience a fully transcendent God, let alone love him? How can one feel the presence of the fully transcendent God in one's life? There must be an immanent dimension to the transcendent God. It takes the form of what we call revelation, whereby transcendence is breached and immanence established.

But there is a problem with revelation — it is a one-off event, the knowledge of which might persist for millennia, but not the experience. And religion is not only epistemic but also, perhaps even principally, experiential. It is not about knowing that there is a god, the God, who created the world and did other amazing things thousands of years ago. It is about experiencing God individually and collectively, from one generation to the next, in our day-to-day life.

In terms of the transcendent God, Muslims and Jews have very similar concepts. The God the Jews know is the God of the law: Torah, and Law. Christians, on the other hand, know God through the figure of Jesus, Christ, his life, his ministry, his crucifixion, and his resurrection.

Revelation, Ritual, Liberty

These different manifestations of the immanent God explain the barely concealed contempt with which many Christians and Jews regard each other's understanding of the divine.

For Christians, Judaism has remained in an earlier, more primitive religious stage tied to ritualistic legalisms. They circumcise their penises, the Christian thinks, whereas we circumcise our hearts. Surely what comes out of a man's mouth is more important than what goes in.

And Jews think, Well, worshiping a truly transcendent God is tough, fit only for the chosen few. For the rest, God had to make himself more accessible by sending a flesh-and-blood son to be the subject of adoration and identification. (That would of course be the charitable view, the uncharitable one being that Christians had to invent such a son).

But both religions face the challenge of going beyond one-time revelatory immanence to continuous experience, maintaining not merely the memory of the revelation but the continuous presence of the revealed God in one's life. This is achieved in a variety of ways, the Eucharist, for example, being an impressive example from the Catholic tradition.

How does the Lord become, and remain, present in everyday Jewish life? Let me first dispel one of the most common anti-Semitic tropes — that Jewish law is all about arid rituals. The moral law in Christianity and Judaism is the same; love thy neighbor is to be found in both testaments, and the Ten Commandments are to be found in the Pentateuch, not to mention the prophets, from Isaiah through Amos, who privileged the ethical and moral dimension of Law.

What differentiates the two traditions, Christian and Jewish, is that the Jewish Law retains the thick matrix of ritual jurisdiction, of which kosher observance is one central part, as normative and binding. Paradoxically, it is through this 'arid,' mindless, irritating ritual that Judaism brings the presence of the divine into human life.

Let us highlight two features of kosher observance, one so obvious it may have escaped your notice: kosher observance concerns food and eating. We can survive without love and sex. Some can even live without working. But we all need to eat. There is, of course, much more to food and eating than merely staying alive.

Cookbooks are bestsellers. Restaurants are more popular than theaters or concert halls. What to eat, how much to eat (the multi-billion-dollar diet industry), when to eat, where to eat, and with whom to eat are questions central to daily existence from Warsaw to New York and from Madrid to Singapore.

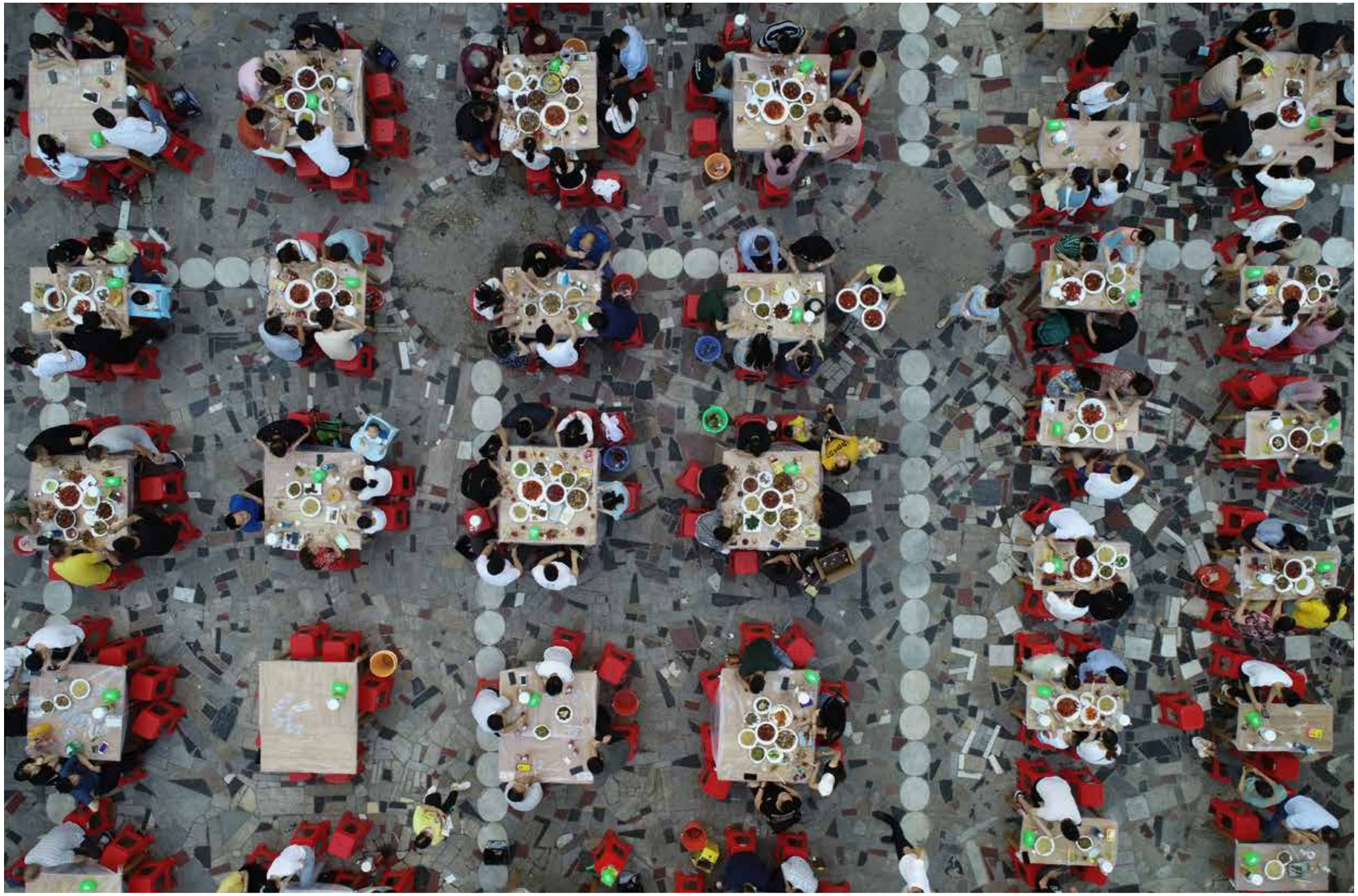
For Jews who observe kosher, the whole day is embedded within the matrix of kosher practice, from breakfast in the morning to the glass of wine before bedtime. Law, the immanent manifestation of the transcendent God, is thus omnipresent in daily life. The divine command touches upon every meal, every bite, every invitation.

And if you add to kosher observance the rules of Shabbat observance — which have such a great impact on the world of work and careers — the ritual rules governing sex ('Oh, love, when was the last day of your period?'), and the rules of dressing and apparel ('Not that wool jacket if it is laced with linen'), the ubiquitous quotidian dimensions of the human condition become imbued with the sacred. God is with you throughout the day, the week, the month, the year. Et comedent, et religionis ergo sum (I eat, therefore I am part of religion).

Within Judaism and Islam, this legal matrix of Shariah and Halakha is often referred to as a yoke. There is a constant temptation to free oneself from these ritualistic rules, which impinge so dramatically on our experience. There is no doubt there is much appeal to this and the experience of the multitudes who have jettisoned the yoke over the centuries and often described it in the vocabulary of freedom and liberation.

But there is another side to the freedom coin. Let us cast our minds back to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve:

To every beast of the earth and fowl of the air, indeed to all living



things the Lord had 'given every green herb for meat.' Nota bene: This would include even the Tree of Knowledge from which they presumably ate with no effect. It was only to humans that God gave liberty to eat of all growing food. 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.'

Several features are worth noting here. It is the Genesis of Law, the first God-given interdiction. It is an interdiction that relates to food and eating: a rule that does not fall in the realm of ethics and morality — knowledge of which, later in Genesis, is said to be part of the human condition, not requiring revelation. Think of Cain, who is punished severely for his murderous act even though God hadn't issued the command 'Thou shalt not kill.' Nor does Cain plead ignorance.

It is an enigmatic and, to human understanding, arbitrary rule. Adam and Eve are not told why they may not eat that particular fruit. It is a rule that applies only to humans, not to animals, who remain free to eat every green plant for food, including the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

A Rule from Elsewhere

In some respects, the interdiction seems a prototype of halal and kosher observance. It is the first link in the chain of the law restricting human freedom. 'From this tree, thou shalt not eat.' But it is precisely here that the other side of the coin of liberty reveals itself.

But for this one interdiction, humans would be — like the beasts — slaves to their appetite. Like all other living creatures, humans would eat whenever, whatever, and however much their desires dictated as the animals in the Garden continued to do. It is Law that frees humans of the slavery of their appetites, giving them true sovereignty over them. Consider how we are enslaved to our careers and to our carnal lusts and you will have an insight into a similar effect of the Sabbath and sexual ritual laws. They have the same liberating effect.

One of the most irritating aspects of halal-kosher observance is the seeming arbitrariness of its rules. We are conditioned by Kantian moral thinking to resist arbitrary norms and, in particular, arbitrary norms that are heteronomous – subject to a law external to our understanding, that we cannot justify. In itself, there is nothing immoral or unethical about eating the corpse of an animal that died a natural death. And yet it is forbidden.

This prohibition serves no discernible health or even moral purpose. One could object to the cruelty of hunting, but a natural death? Like Adam and Eve, we cannot understand the intrinsic meaning of the prohibition. We are meant to be left wondering. It is clear that no physical or material harm will ensue by our disregarding of these laws. Yet it is precisely this incomprehension that produces the liberating effect. There is no earthly reason for the abstention or the check on my desire other than a different transcendental enslavement to transcendent truth — the command of the Almighty.

The heteronomous nature of the interdict deepens the meaning of this liberty even further. The interdict is not a norm issued from another human — a parent, a king, or a parliament (i.e. the People). Law issues from an authority outside this world; that is the meaning of transcendence in the monotheistic worldview. I enslave myself to this and so gain sovereignty over my human condition.

Perhaps this line of reasoning will persuade you of why I resist any functional, intrinsic value (like health) to the specific rules of kosher. To understand halal-kosher in this functional sense would return the human subject to a human- rather than a God-centered understanding of the ultimate goal of humanity.

This last affirmation may lead you to think that Law and Kantian morality are oppositional: Law is imposed from the outside, whereas the essence of Kantian morality is self-generated autonomy. If so, these 'table rules' may leave us uneasy, for they clash with our Kantian heritage: the disdain for a non-self-generated, autonomous normativity, the contempt for behavior that is dictated merely by an external authority.

How can we give value, we may wonder, to a construct that, when stripped of adornment, amounts to:

'I do it because I am commanded to?' Why can't you have the cheeseburger and the milkshake? For myself, I can only say, 'Because my father (in heaven) says I cannot.' But more on this shortly.

The Religious Effect, and Freedom of Religion

I argue above that the distinctive, revolutionary dimension of Abrahamic monotheism was not simply or even primarily the oneness of the divine but also its transcendental nature. I might now add the third distinctive and even more revolutionary dimension: its covenantal aspect.

By definition, there are two parties to a covenant: two subjects, rather than subject and object; two sovereigns who enter autonomously and not coercively into a pact. This is banal. The only startling thing is to understand that this view underlies Abrahamic monotheism and undergirds kosher observance.

Torah and Nomos are offered to be accepted or rejected. The Church proposes, in the dramatic statement of John Paul II, she never imposes. It is the essence of covenantal religion, premised on the human subject being a free moral agent with the ability to choose and the responsibility to live and face the consequences of their choices.

Kosher observance is part of the covenantal worldview defining the relationship between God and humans. Since the covenant is with a corporate body — the people — it binds successive generations and endures as long as the people endure.

But acceptance by each individual of the covenant, the individual decision to remain bound by it, must, like the original collective acceptance, be autonomous, though the norms remain external and their rationale, in many cases, beyond our comprehension.

Freedom of religion — the most precious of our freedoms — incorporates freedom from religion. A 'yes' to God is only meaningful if it is uncoerced and an expression of the free will of the homo religiosus. Entering into a covenantal relationship with the Almighty is and must be an autonomous decision that accepts heteronomous transcendental norms only after the fact.

Why, one may ask, would one submit to remain bound (or, for converts, elect to be bound) by such norms? One possible answer is that this choice represents a rejection of Kantian hubris. Unlike the Christian faith in the incarnated transcendent God, or the Jewish belief in Law as the manifestation of the transcendent God, Kantian moral reasoning amounts to the self-deification of the human subject — man and woman worshiping themselves.

It is also a view that takes its cue from one of the most remarkable conversations between God and man. In Genesis 18, we read Abraham asking God to spare Sodom if there are fifty righteous men in the city, then 'bargaining down' to ten, stating that in no circumstances can one punish the guilty with the innocent.

It is a moment of great daring given Abraham's faith in God's righteousness. It is the Copernican moment in the understanding of divine justice. The proposition 'If God commands it, it must be just' is replaced by the proposition 'If it is unjust, it cannot be God's will.'

For the justice of the whole earth, God will commit no injustice. It is a sharp reminder that religious Law is the fusion of the ethical and universal (the inhabitants of Sodom were not Hebrews) with the ritual and particularistic.

The human subject like Abraham has a different role in relation to each. Like Abraham, we have a duty to protest any representation that suggests an unjust God. Maybe with this caveat, the choice to accept the yoke of a covenant the principal content of which is the heteronomous Law may seem somewhat more understandable.

Why, Then, Do Muslims and Jews Observe Halal-Kosher?

'Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man' has an intuitive and seemingly compelling logic in the light of which halal-kosher observance seems not just irrational but senseless and even misguided.

I would readily accept this teaching with one additional word: 'Not only that which goeth into the mouth….' I am hoping that at least some of my readers will be persuaded that halal-kosher observance as part of the rich matrix of Law — ethical and ritual — and as part of the norms through which God revealed himself to and drew an eternal covenant with the sons of Abraham is far from primitive but has a certain beauty in allowing a particular continuous and quotidian relationship with the transcendent God, a particular liberty through submitting to him, and a dignity which expresses a particular testimony to a life of Imitatio Dei (Imitation of God), thus privately and publicly sanctifying the Holy One Blessed be He in this world.

Joseph H.H. Weiler *is a South African-born American Jurist, Rector of the Florence-based European University Institute, and Director of two research centers at New York University.*

Critter Cuisine:

Food Metaphors from the Animal Kingdom

By Mohamed Makhzangi

The Vampire Bat

Delicately Procured

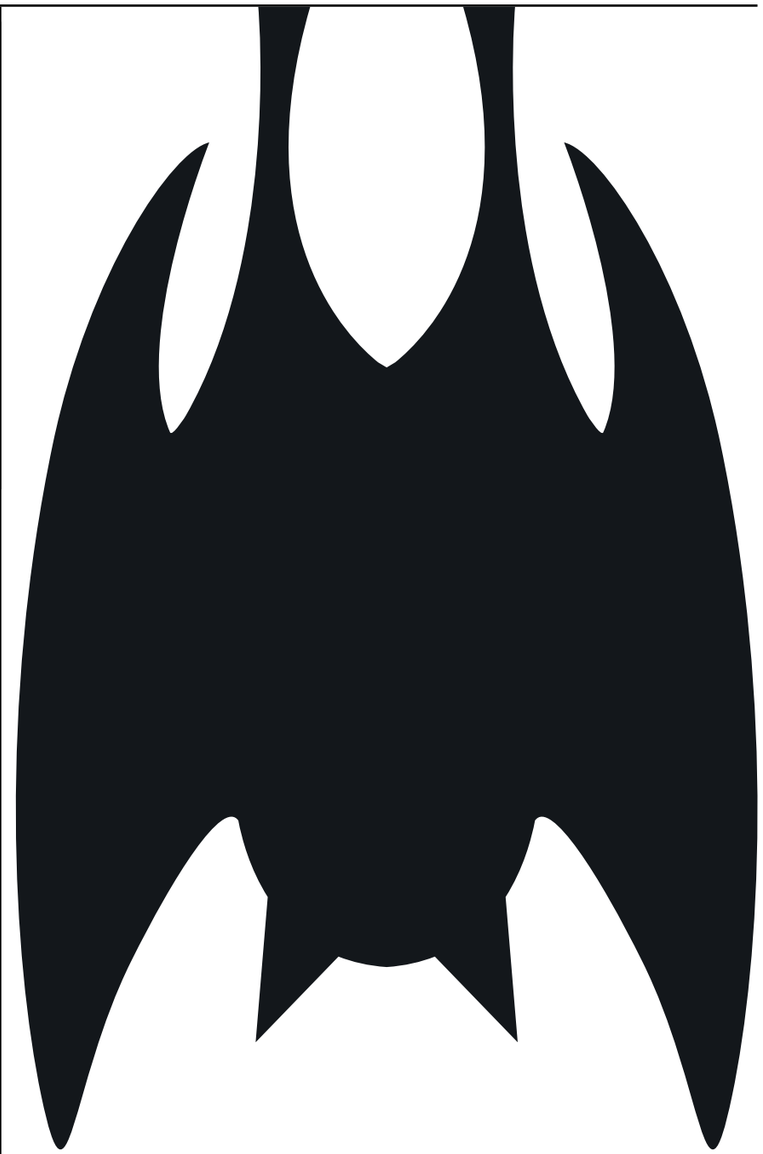
As darkness falls in the forests, mountains, and villages of the Amazon, vampire bats leave their caves in search of food — a few drops of blood, less than a teaspoon, from a suitable 'prey' are enough for three days. These vampire bats are not as hideous as the name suggests; they are so tiny that the largest one is no bigger than the smallest sparrows, and they suck blood from the veins of their 'victims' with amazing delicacy.

The bat lands close to its target — a cow or a sheep — guided not by sight but by lightning-fast, inaudible pulses that bounce off the target and are received back by the bat's biological radar. This is called 'echolocation.'

Since it is not good at walking on its legs, it leans on the ends of its forearms, with which it folds and unfolds its skinny, cloak-like wings. By doing so, it looks like an elderly, prudent intruder who cautiously and gracefully leaps and lands on the body of the target — a sleeping cow, for instance — which hardly feels it.

With extreme delicacy and thanks to its four teeth facing each other at the front of its jaws (two on top directing the two at the bottom, all as sharp as a skilled surgeon's scalpel), the bat inflicts a scratch-like wound to the area it has demarcated with exquisite precision. Below is a small blood vessel where warm blood is flowing. The bat, however, does not sense this heat with its muzzle when it touches the victim's body, but from a distance, through infrared.

As the wound runs deeper, the bat pours a painkiller with its saliva, which also contains an anticoagulant; this way, blood continues to flow as the bat licks without the victim feeling any pain.



Before dawn and its bright light, the bats take refuge once again on the ceilings of their caves, upside down.

A Few Drops

Their claws do not inflict wounds but allow them to hold firmly to the protuberances of the ceilings as if they were glued. Heads down, the bats cluster into large groups, the females on one side and males on the other. This sex segregation is widespread among most wild animals, perhaps due to reasons such as energy efficiency and the instinctive eagerness to link sex to reproduction.

Yet, in spite of this segregation, the bats collectively review the

blood reaped outside the cave. Some bats have been lucky and obtained enough blood to stay alive for three days, perhaps even more. Others have been unlucky and have not licked a single drop of blood; as a result, they risk dying quickly unless they are rescued with a few drops that will keep them alive until the next day.

The bats leave in search of food collectively, depending on weather conditions and whether nourishment is nearby and does not involve being chased or facing any risks or dangers. If all these conditions are not met as soon as possible, the unlucky bats have no choice but to borrow part of what their lucky peers have reaped.

Life-Saving Kiss

Some of the full bats, though, refuse to give even a single drop. Others deplore such behavior and share what they have with those in need by regurgitation, mouth to mouth; the receiving bats seem to be kissing their donors in gratitude, while the donors are being kissed shyly.

Since it is the females that regulate these life-saving donations to those who are about to die, they do not forget who has given and who has not. During the mating season — which occurs only once a year provided it is done consensually — all the females refuse to embrace those despicable males who denied their brothers those life-saving kisses. This will hopefully put an end to their callous lineage!

The King Cobra

Risky Love

When the time comes for a female king cobra to be impregnated, she moves through the forest, scattering pheromones to attract males. As soon as she finds one that can perform the task, she hurries away from this trail of pheromones so that she is not eaten by her partner — which is hungry after mating — or killed by some latecomer that swallows her until suffocated and then spits out her carcass. This is the 'love equation' of these venomous kings.

As soon as the queens — including this one escaping with her fertilized eggs — reach a safe location, they start building a nest for their eggs, unless they have already built one before going to mate.

Warm Nest

This nidification and nest-guarding process is one of the most astonishing things that clearly demonstrate that even the females of these deadly snakes have a maternal instinct. And yet, it takes them just seven milliliters of venom — which they release with one single bite — to kill a large elephant or twenty humans!

With no feet or hands, the queen puts together fallen leaves with her mouth, leaf by leaf, crawling back and forth, sometimes for up to four consecutive days without eating. She forms a pile in which she lays twenty to thirty eggs to be warmed by the heat released by the decomposition of the leaves.

In fact, this queen, despite her warm maternal instinct, is cold-blooded and has no heat of her own! She then climbs onto the pile and guards it, showing her fangs, spitting deadly venom, and emitting a bark-like hiss to frighten away whoever approaches.

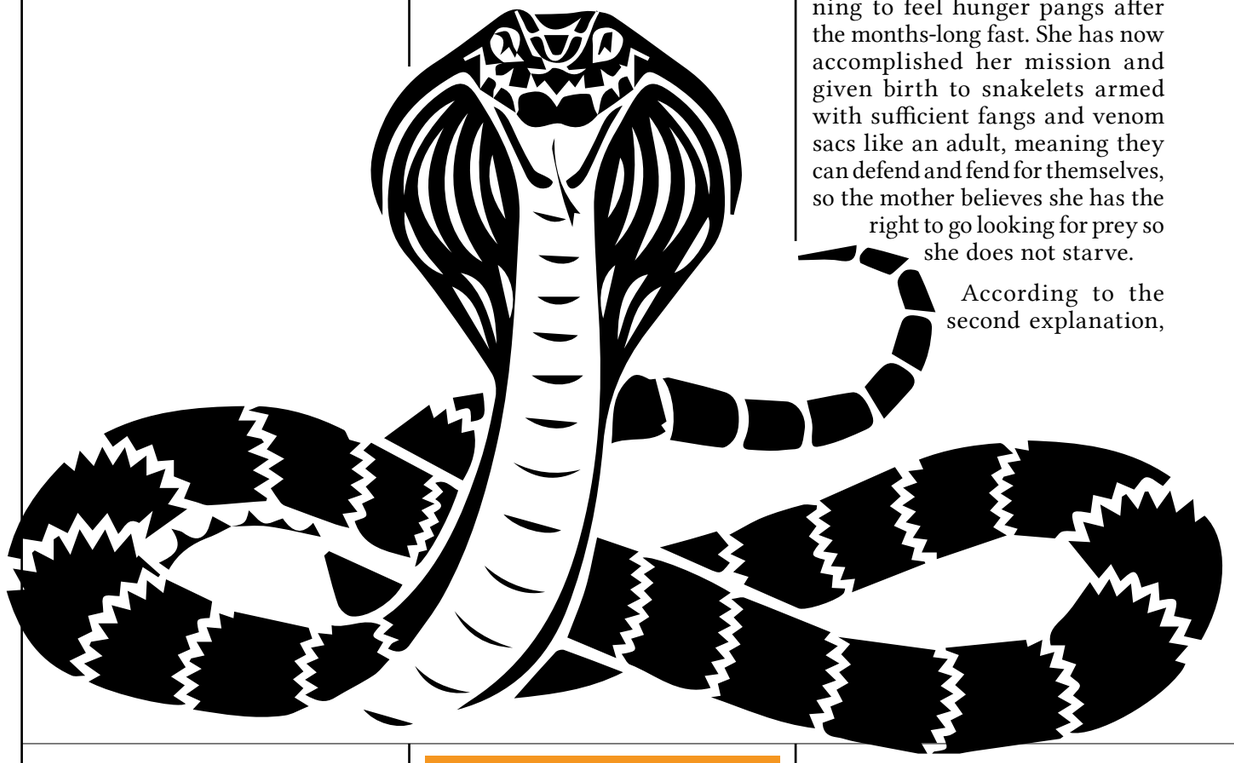
She keeps guarding the nest for two or three months, during which she composedly does a long fast only broken with rainwater! As soon as her sensitive belly feels the vibrations indicating that the eggs are beginning to hatch, she hastens down the pile and leaves the nest and the snakelets forever. What a mind-boggling paradox!

There are three possible explanations. First, the mother is beginning to feel hunger pangs after the months-long fast. She has now accomplished her mission and given birth to snakelets armed with sufficient fangs and venom sacs like an adult, meaning they can defend and fend for themselves, so the mother believes she has the right to go looking for prey so she does not starve.

According to the second explanation, the mother flees from herself. Being a starving cannibal, she does not want to eat her own snakelets!

The final and most likely explanation is that baby snakes usually flee on their own as soon as they come out of their eggs so that their mother does not eat them.

And yet, the ending is heartbreaking all the same. Out of twenty to thirty newborn cobras, only one or two grow up and follow in their parents' footsteps - giving birth to offspring that will mostly be devoured by owls at night and mosquitoes and other snakes during the day.



Pacificus Nematodes

Micro Lives

A thousand pristionchus pacificus nematodes placed one on top of the other are one centimeter high at most, which is extraordinary by human standards — a living tower thirty times higher than any one of these worms. Imagine a tower made up of thirty professional, skilled acrobats, standing one on the shoulders of the other; the first would be standing on the ground and the last on top of a twenty-storey building, which is impossible for human beings.

These microscopic predatory worms, however, can do so thanks not only to their acrobatic skills but also to their ability to secrete a sticky substance that holds their tower together. At the top, there is just one or few worms reaching the target, namely a soft spot in the abdomen of a prey larger than several thousand of these micro-parasites — a beetle (more precisely, a colored beetle), pristionchus pacificus's favorite host.

Without the beetle feeling what is happening, the worms at the top sink their jaws into the belly of their giant victim and suck out its inner content in turn, leaving nothing but the empty, drained carcass of a dead, colored beetle.

Tower Top

However, the thousand worms that make up the tower cannot all reach this feast at the top, especially those at the base. They are, somehow, aware that they will not get a share of the deceased beetle's sap. But once the glue that holds the tower together dissolves, these parasites chaotically collapse on top of each other. At that point, the worms at the base, hungry, head for the full bellies of the worms that were at the top and split them with their long, pointed snouts and sharp jaws. They then suck out their lifeblood till the last drop, leaving nothing but empty, drained, lifeless carcasses.

The Common Cuckoo

In the Cradle

The female cuckoo prefers to show off rather than painstakingly brood, protect, and feed her chicks until they grow up. She does something very strange in the world of birds: she keeps her egg inside her body for an extra twenty-four hours and flies off to search for the nest of another bird (not a cuckoo, obviously), where a female is brooding.

As soon as the latter leaves in search of food, the cuckoo swoops in, ejects an egg, and quickly replaces it with its own. Strangely enough, the cuckoo's egg is camouflaged, so when the host returns, she rarely sees through the deception.

The cuckoo's egg often hatches earlier than the others and the chick is stronger than its nestmates because it has remained longer inside the egg and inside its frivolous mother. And just like its parents, the baby cuckoo steals the other chicks' food, despite being given its share by the host. And there's more!

An Intrusive Killer

When the host leaves the nest in search of food for her chicks, the baby cuckoo quickly attacks its nest mates, throwing them out to get even more food and care from the deceived mother. Yet, she cannot stop feeding this treacherous bird, because it resorts to a cynical ploy; it starts screaming, which may attract raptors!

Quick Trick

The cuckoo is usually described as foolish because it lays its chicks in another bird's nest, risking their destruction and reducing its species' chances of survival. But it is not. Using human psychology terms, we could only describe this chick as psychopathic, egocentric, and narcissistic, namely a criminal with mental disorders, self-centered, and vain to the point of idiocy or madness.

The chick does not benefit from its usurpation for long. Having not been raised wisely, it is the bird most at risk of being caught even by the least experienced hunters. All they have to do is stand in the forest and imitate its call so that the cuckoo recklessly rushes out of hiding and responds with a louder callback. Having been a usurper since it was in the egg, it thinks another bird has come to steal its nest, so it screams to warn it away. It does not realize, however, that a bullet is about to kill it or that someone is climbing up to grab it by the neck or wing.

And if this does not occur, nature has another grim fate in store for it. When seasons change and the cold of its habitat forces it to migrate far away in search of warmth and food, it sets off alone, without any flock or guide. Therefore, it risks being shot during the day, getting lost at night, or falling from the sky on its own simply because it has flown too high, too far, or well beyond its capabilities. This is why it is estimated that only very few cuckoos return safely at the end of the migration season.

However, all of this only applies to common cuckoos, which make up almost one-third of all cuckoos. The other two-thirds do not engage in such fraud, aggression, and blackmail, are larger, have more beautiful colors, and are better at nesting and singing!

Fire Hawks

Flames and Ashes

As wildfires spread across Australia, a rash of stereotypical stories broke out in the media about the discovery of a kind of raptor dubbed the 'fire hawk,' which was said to contribute to these fires almost like a human criminal; that is, more wickedly and greedily than had ever been observed in the instinctive relationship between predators and preys.

According to these stories, as soon as a wildfire broke out, a fire hawk dived into the flames, picked up a burning branch with its beak or claws, and dropped it one kilometer away in grassland that was not yet ablaze. As soon as flames and smoke billowed up, these raptors reportedly gathered and hovered around this new fire.

As the large insects and small reptiles and rodents hiding in the grass began to flee, these birds of prey were thought to be sent into what one study described as a 'killing and feeding frenzy.' Based on the source data, the media identified three kinds of so-called fire hawks — the black kite, whistling kite, and the brown falcon.

Indeed, as soon as they see smoke rising from a fire in grasslands, forests, fields, or pastures, many birds of prey, such as kites, rush there in groups. As soon as they arrive — in a clear collective frenzy — they swoop down like lightning on the rodents, reptiles, and insects fleeing the flames, grabbing them with their claws, tearing them apart, and devouring them in the air repeatedly.

This is what is defined by the questionable ethnobiological study mentioned above as a killing and feeding frenzy; an improper analogy between human voracity and frenzy on the one hand and wildlife's momentary, instinctive needs on the other.

Perhaps the most telling scientific criticism of this arbitrary definition is to be found in something known to zoologists and their readers; these birds of prey, like all carnivores, are particularly voracious during breeding and migration seasons, which involve greater efforts that require more food, notably proteins.

These seasons usually fall in spring and summer, which, incidentally, is when wildfires mostly occur, whatever their causes. Such blazes inevitably result in a momentary abundance of prey fleeing the flames that end up in the claws and beaks of raptors and other predators rushing to the areas around the fires, which they know will provide a wealth of meat that they desperately need. Their voraciousness is also due to some perception they have developed over time that wildfires are always followed by severe food shortages until the ecosystem restores itself.

Staying Alive

However, there is no killing and feeding frenzy, but rather vital needs that — however cruel they may look — are extremely logical. These needs are logical if we contemplate them through the eyes of these instinctive creatures and not through the eyes of the most notorious arsonists, who are eager to turn these forests and grasslands into farms.

Mohamed Makhzangi *is an Egyptian writer and physician.*

Orthodoxies of Abstinence: The Meaning of Fasting

By Anba Ermia

The peoples of the East are among the most profound and ancient peoples in terms of interest in the religious life, for they venerate the spiritual relationship with God and have always striven to root it in their lives through the ages.

Fasting is one of the basic tenets of all religions known to mankind. If we trace the origin of fasting, we find that it goes back to Adam and Eve, when God commanded them not to eat the fruits of a certain tree in paradise. Incidentally, in this recent period, several faiths concluded their fast, with Muslims breaking their fast in the Eid that follows the holy month of Ramadan and Christians celebrating Easter after the Great Fast. Thus, everyone was sharing in offering God a profound spiritual act.

Fasting is one of the common practices in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is also known and widespread in other faiths, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and others.

Fasting was known to the Jews from the earliest times, since we find the Prophet King David fasting. He says in the Book of Psalms: 'When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting.' (Psalms 69:10). And Prophet Isaiah says: 'Isn't this the fast that I have chosen: to break the chains of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and tear off every yoke? Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your home, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?' (Isaiah 58:6-7). And Prophet Joel says: '"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning."' (Joel 2:12).

In Christianity, we find the Gospel mentioning Jesus' fast: 'After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.' (Matthew 4:2). And on his teaching about fasting: 'When you fast, do not be somber like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they already have their full reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that your fasting will not be obvious to men, but only to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' (Matthew 6:16-18).

So the apostles learned to fast from Christ, and it was said of them 'while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting…' (Acts 13:2).

In Islam, we find in the Sura of the Cow: 'O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was for those before you, so perhaps you will become pious.' (Quran 2:183), and: 'Fast is better for you if only you knew.' (Quran 2:184).

And a prophetic tradition says: 'Every deed done by a man is returned to him multiplied: the good deed tenfold, up to seven hundredfold. The Most High said: "Except fasting, which belongs to me. I alone know the benefit, he leaves appetites, food, and drink for my sake."'

We also find fasting in other faiths for the purpose of controlling the body and liberating the soul. For example, Gandhi ate only plant-based foods, and he used to fast for long periods of time as a form of self-purification, spiritual elevation, and to overcome the obstacles he faced.

Likewise, Buddhists believe that fasting creates a kind of discipline to help with meditation and good health, and is also a means to purify the self, liberate the mind from illusion, and help the soul to curb its lusts and greed to achieve tranquility and mental clarity. We therefore always find a strong philosophy confirming the importance of fasting for humans.

Adam and Eve were the first to be commanded to fast and their expulsion from Paradise was the punishment for not fasting.

Training the Body

Fasting is not, as some believe, torture to the body, but rather discipline

of the will with respect to food, especially the foods that move our lust. Human nature is made up of three basic elements: body, soul, and spirit. If physical matters prevail over a person's actions, they become a physical person; but if they manage to overcome the requirements of the body and develop their spirit, then they are a spiritual person.

Fasting helps a person train their will by abstaining from food and drink for a period of time, and then by eating foods they do not desire. Thus, they can rise above the demands of the flesh and material things, to give more attention to the spirit. This makes fasting one of the spiritual means by which a person prepares and trains to elevate the body to a deeper spiritual level in which their relationship with God grows. One of the Fathers of the Coptic Church says: 'Fasting prepares the soul for spiritual refreshment, contact with God, and filling the heart with God's love.'

Fasting also gives strength to soul and spirit. A person's success in giving up something they crave, such as food, helps to strengthen them in providing more on the spiritual and psychological levels. The soul that can control what it eats and drinks, dispensing with delicious food, is undoubtedly able to forgo a beloved sin, money it offers the needy, and time and effort to help others. Therefore, fasting is the first training that leads a person to engage energetically in more righteous deeds towards all people.

The person who fasts feels hunger and thirst, which makes them experience feelings of extreme need, perceiving the reality of the painful feelings that the poor and needy go through. Thus, you may see such a person hastening to help every needy person they meet. I remember a story I read about a very rich man who trained himself to feel what the needy and the poor do.

He would wear shabby clothes and stand in the street for hours in the rain. When asked about his behavior, he said he was doing what was making him feel the extent of the suffering of the afflicted and the needy, and so giving them everything he could to ease their misery.

Pushing away Evil

Fasting also strengthens the will of a person and urges them to abstain from evil, such as gossip, hatred, resentment, and bad habits. If a person does not achieve this, they will not have benefited at all from their fast.

One of the fathers of the Coptic church says: 'He who abstains from food, and whose heart does not abstain from anger and hatred, and whose tongue speaks falsehoods, his fast is invalid, because the tongue's fast is better than the mouth's fast, and the heart's fast is better than both.'

Another Father says: 'The real fast is the imprisonment of vices, that is, controlling the tongue, controlling anger, and subduing desires.' This does not mean that a person should stop fasting or neglect it if they cannot really stop a sin. Rather, this calls for strengthening their fasting and praying, so that they can overcome that sin.

Fasting is accompanied by other practices, the most important of which are prayer, reading God's Word, studying the lives of the saints to follow their example, asceticism, and contemplation while offering good deeds to every person.

This is the food you provide to the soul, which must be redoubled during the period of fasting. Among the most beautiful words that have been said about this are: 'Fasting is always accompanied by prayer, and this means that fasting without prayer is suppression and deprivation, but through prayer, it turns into a spiritual release of the soul.'

Therefore, associate your fasting with prayer, so that it will lift you up to enter the presence of God, and your life will be filled with blessings and the power with which you can redress your faults towards God and people.

One of the fathers says: 'Fasting humbles the body.' Through it, a person realizes their weakness and needs, which makes them move away from pride and self-esteem. In their humility, they seek God's help, and their heart is filled with mercy toward others. They do not condemn anyone in their weakness or inability, but they realize that all human beings need God's help above all and to strengthen each other.

Fasting is also an expression of human love towards God because they prefer God's commandment to their will and comfort, declaring their love for God. Fasting — which begins with abstaining from food and drink, then develops into abstinence from every evil that God rejects and performing good deeds for every needy person — is undoubtedly a real expression of an individual's true love for their Lord.

Therefore, let's fast as we train to love God, and at the same time to love others by feeling their needs and offering them a helping hand, not only a material one but also a spiritual one! The kind and gentle words of encouragement that you offer a person overwhelmed by feelings of frustration are a hand extended to help them. The time that you provide to help a person is a hand that supports them. The pure and sincere advice that a person needs is a hand that sustains them.

Some, in order not to fast, may use the excuse that it negatively affects the body, but this is not true at all. Fasting helps many organs in the body to work more efficiently. Rather, we see the developed world now warning against overeating or excessive fatty foods that harm the body and cause many diseases.

Many good wishes to you all, and prayers to God that he may preserve our country, Egypt, the Middle East, and the whole world in security and peace, and grant us goodness and his blessings.

***Anba Ermia** is the Bishop-General and President of the Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center. He is also the Deputy Secretary-General of the Egyptian Family House.*

Against Consumption: Nizar Ayad on Taming the Will

By Marianna Massa

Nazir Ayad is the Secretary-General of the Islamic Research Academy at Cairo's Al-Azhar University and a Professor of Doctrine and Philosophy. He is the author of over 30 publications on subjects ranging from theological sciences to philosophy, logic, Sufism, and the various Islamic juridical schools and religions.

***Jusur (J)**: What is the significance of fasting and what is its philosophy in Islam?*

Nazir Ayad (NA): The significance of fasting does not lie in abstaining from eating and drinking, as some imagine. Therefore, whoever fasts with this intention risks invalidating his fast. God has prescribed this act of worship for several reasons, the first of which is fear of God. As the Noble Quran says, 'O believers, fasting is enjoined on you as it was on those before you so that you might become righteous.'

Another of these reasons is sharing hunger and thirst with the poor and needy. Fasting is also a training for abstinence from sin and striving to meet God Almighty's expectations. The philosophy of fasting in Islam includes preparing a person to sustain hard efforts to develop their willpower and be able to make difficult decisions.

***J:** What are the benefits of fasting for individuals and society?*

NA: Sharing the suffering, the pains and needs of others instills goodness in a Muslim's heart, because it renders them more inclined to help and to give. A Muslim who fasts wants their fast to be valid, therefore they adhere to good morals in deeds and words, which reflects on the well-being of their society.

***J:** What are the ethical principles governing people's relationship with food?*

NA: It is known that the quality and quantity of food play an important role in human behavior and moral orientation. As Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali recounts, 'The worst cause of ruin for man is the lust of his stomach. Because of it, Adam (peace be upon him) and Eve were thrown out of the eternal abode into the abode of ignominy and scarcity, for they were forbidden to eat from the prohibited tree, but they ate its fruit when they were overwhelmed by lust, and their nakedness was revealed to their eyes.

'The stomach is the origin of all lust and the source of diseases and sores, followed by the lust of ardent desire for women, then the thirst for money and power, which are means to have more women and more food. Excessive power and money are followed by all sorts of desires, rivalries, and envy, which breed the plague of hypocrisy and the calamity of bragging and arrogance. This, in turn, leads to resentment, envy, enmity, and hatred, along with tyranny, indecency, and transgression. All this is the result of neglecting the stomach and the consequent reckless way in which it is filled.'

Al-Ghazali's words on the consequences of food highlight and clarify its close relationship with moral discipline.

***J:** What is the role of fasting in the education of children and teenagers? What are its benefits in the context of the consumer society they live in?*

NA: Children and teenagers living in our times face many challenges that hinder their education.

Nazir Ayad

Therefore, they have a great need to perform acts of obedience, such as fasting, so that they can be educated to correct their behavior and control themselves.

In this way, generations of responsible adults will be formed, ready to strive for intellectual growth. Fasting, therefore, is a way of educating the young to realize that other young people exist who are less fortunate and wealthy than they are, and who must be taken care of.

Fasting calls for resoluteness, good manners, patience, and compassion, and fosters the desire to alleviate other people's pain. Furthermore, fasting contributes to spreading the spirit of social solidarity to build a cohesive and integrated society.

Dead Man Dines:
What Is Eaten on the Other Side

By Ahmed Abdel-Latif

According to the ancient Egyptian conception, human life is an imitation of the movement of nature: sunrise, sunset, then a new sunrise; a flood, dryness, then a new flood. If this is true, then the afterlife certainly exists, because humans themselves are part of nature.

Therefore, human existence must be a cycle of life, death, and resurrection. The point was made by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges when he wrote that all human inventions are nothing but an imitation of what exists in nature – except for the book.

Glasses simulate sight, headphones simulate hearing, all means of transportation simulate walking, and musical instruments simulate birdsong. Even the computer is an image of the functions of the mind and memory.

As for the book, it is the glory of humanity: the purest invention. Indeed, on careful reflection, it's clear the book and writing enjoy a sanctified image in the Abrahamic religions and, before that, in ancient civilizations. 'The Book of the Dead', 'The Book of Emerging Forth into the Light', and 'The Book of Gates' are all books from ancient Egypt that attempt to depict life after death, even if they were written on papyrus paper.

The cycle of human beings, which is the same as the cycle of nature, prompted them to imagine paradise and eternity as a reward for goodness and kindness, in contrast with eternal annihilation (according to ancient Egyptians), or eternity in hell (for Muslims and Christians) as a punishment for evil.

This belief unites the Orient with the Aztec and Mayan civilizations in Latin America, as the fate of the good among the dead is to enjoy a paradise in which loved ones meet and achieve, in their new life, what they could not in the previous life.

In Bliss We Eat

Ancient Egyptians, Muslims, and Latin Americans all agree that this bliss is not complete without food; not as life's fuel and the body's need, but rather as a pleasure worthy of being experienced. It is one of the components of paradise, and perhaps the attention paid to it, and to all its details, reveals its essentiality to us.

Food and drink, therefore, are one of the divine promises of 'satiety' for those who desist from harm and abstain from what is prohibited. So the reward for deprivation in this world is satiety in the hereafter.

Food rituals for Muslims begin at birth. On the seventh day of the newborn's life, a 'aqiqa' is performed — a sacrifice of two animals for a boy and one animal for a girl. A Muslim, therefore, begins their life with an oblation to God to be redeemed from evil. Their life begins by feeding the needy among relatives and neighbors. The blood of the sacrificed animal (a ram or a goat) redeems the life of the newborn, but the greatest goal is social solidarity, represented by feeding the needy.

In these civilizations food is also deeply linked to the moment of transition from life to death. The ancient Egyptians offered food to the deceased, who, according to their vision of the afterlife, took advantage of it especially in the first stage of death, before entering eternity.

The idea of sacramental offerings in popular Islamic tradition also involves Eid Al-Adha (the Feast of the Sacrifice), a socio-religious rite that aspires to make others happy, so that they feel that a feast has begun. This feast is linked to food and to eating meat, so the rich and the poor are equal in eating the same thing during the feast days, which is not the case the rest of the year.

On the other hand, the Ramadan fast is the suspension of food and drink — another form of equality, but of opposite meaning. God's promise to those who fast is to enter paradise through the door of Rayyan, whose name contains the meaning of irrigating or watering, as opposed to thirst. This door is reserved for those who fast in the month of Ramadan.

Just as a Muslim's life begins with an offering, it ends with another offering: food distributed by the dead's family in the cemeteries, whether on the day of burial, or on the first Thursday after the death, or on the fortieth day after it. The rite of the forty days is an ancient Egyptian custom that has become part of funeral rites in Egypt for Muslims and Christians both.

The verses on food in the afterlife occupy a remarkable place in the Quranic depiction of heaven, as in 'therein they have food for morn and evening' (Quran 19:62). The expression 'they have food' reveals that it is a gift and a divine bestowal. There is no need to work hard to get food, it will be available day and night. There will be also young servants ready to pour all the desired drinks, drawn from inexhaustible springs, 'with bowls and ewers and a cup from a pure spring,' (Quran 56:18).

Islamic tradition indicates wine (forbidden in earthly life) as the main drink in paradise, since there is nothing forbidden there, and the presence of a river of wine denotes abundance and satiety. It is then explained how wine is drunk. One verse says: 'There, are they watered with a cup whereof the mixture is of ginger,' (Quran 76:17), that is, wine is mixed with ginger — a type of mixture unknown in earthly life.

Then, the food is mentioned: 'And fruit that they prefer and flesh of fowls that they desire,' (Quran 56:20-21). Fruit is cited as an element of this food and whoever earns paradise can choose what they most desire. Then, on the table appears poultry, to which the Quran associates the verb 'to desire'. Meat, therefore, is among the main elements of a Muslim's table, from their birth to their entry into paradise. Since Muslims, during their lives, (from the 'aqiqa' to the sacrifice of Eid Al-Adha) offer it to the poor, their reward in the next life will be to have it available 'morn and evening'.

In a certain sense, it can be said that the food of the afterlife for Muslims is the food already existing in this life, both the licit and the illicit, bearing in mind, however, that the description of the pleasures of paradise and its beatitudes is the attempt to familiarize something that is difficult to grasp with the mind, since in paradise we will find 'what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived,' as a prophetic tradition says. Since it is difficult to describe what we do not know, approximation is the best method.

Following this method, the idea of food in Islamic popular tradition can be summed up in sacrifice and sacramental offerings in this life. Although this does not prevent us from enjoying it, the principle according to which good things are declared licit and bad things are forbidden (Quran 7:157) is the sine qua non-condition that regulates the consumption of meals, in addition to the food etiquette that requires, for example, to eat with the right hand, take food from the closest plate and choose the closest portion on that plate.

When a Muslim dies, food becomes a charity that their family offers to the poor in the name of their spirit. In the afterlife, food and drink become an absolute pleasure, without privations or restrictions.

In ancient Egypt there were no forbidden foods. The Egyptian table abounded in beer (in the Egyptian museum there is a statue of a brewer), poultry, fruit, and vegetables. Onions, garlic, and lentils are mentioned. The Egyptians attached great importance to bread, varying its shape and flavor from classic bread to thin wafers made with butter or eggs. Although meat was present on the Egyptian table, vegetables were preferred, because there was an abundance of fruit and vegetables. Only the wealthy consumed a lot of meat.

The earthly table of ancient Egyptians extended to the offerings made by a family in the burial chamber, by the coffin, upon the death of their householder or son. Egyptians used to imagine that one of the souls of the dead would come to eat, and they would give it one of their preferred foods.

Other sacramental offerings were intended for the gods and accompanied the deceased on their journey to the afterlife. They consisted of beer, bread, meat, and milk, among other foods. This custom has been handed down to today's Egyptians, who are also used to offering food on the tombs, but from a different perspective.

In popular Islamic tradition, it is no longer thought that this food is consumed by the spirit of the deceased, but that it is charity capable of purifying that spirit in the next life. Almsgiving is a good deed done in the name of the deceased to alleviate their torment or bolster their standing. In this sense, it is not the food that accompanies the deceased on their journey, but its positive effect — that is, the good deeds offered by the family in their name as a final farewell gesture.

The food of the afterlife, then, for ancient Egyptians begins from the moment of death. For Muslims, however, there is a phase called the 'barzakh,' in which the dead body adheres to absolute stillness until the Day of Resurrection comes, when all people and things are reawakened to life, and the phase of reward and punishment, paradise and hell, begins. Then, food becomes an element of paradise.

On the other hand, ancient Egyptians embark on a long journey without ever stopping. They pass from gate to gate, face Osiris's trial, and, if they have been good, finally reach heaven to enjoy eternal life. Otherwise, they vanish for eternity. During this journey, which apparently takes place with body and soul, one of the spirits of the deceased receives food, while a third spirit roams the places they loved.

Mexican Rituals and the Offerings to the Dead

On another continent with an ancient culture, before the Spanish conquest, the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico also followed rituals related to death as part of life. With the arrival of the invaders, this ritual was integrated with that of the new religion, Catholicism, becoming known today as The Day of the Dead.

The rituals of this day include going to cemeteries to decorate them with flowers and, along parallel lines, preparing food offerings in the home. The quality of the food depends on the economic situation of each family, but each endeavors to make it as opulent as possible, exceeding the expenses for Christmas and New Year celebrations.

This day reflects Mexican beliefs regarding the deceased and reveals a community of solidarity, in which every member participates in a rite of faith that reaches even schools, which put together offerings with various foods, drinks, incense, flowers, pictures, and music. The rites extend to the exhibition of strictly personal objects of the deceased by his relatives.

On a raised platform, like a podium, sweets are placed next to bread and photographs of the deceased. Here, bread is one of the main elements of the afterlife's food, just as it was for ancient Egyptians. It is the basis of celebrations dedicated to the spirits of the fathers and the grandfathers. In addition to the spiritual depth of this rite, there is another depth that reflects social cohesion. This rite represents the encounter with the

deceased but, at the same time, the encounter of the living with the living, as well as the renewed question of death as an extension of life.

There are ancient cultures in Mexico that originated in Mesoamerica, such as the Aztec or Mexican civilization, which spread their religious practices and beliefs about death. Their ideas can be summed up in the fact that death is a continuation of life and that it is the final destiny of man.

This civilization believed that the dead have nine homes and four worlds, in each of which life continues after death. Death itself is what creates balance in the universe, and according to the death of a person, their place in the other world is determined, as well as their food and the form their afterlife takes. There are those who settle in Omeyocan (where the sun god lives), or in Tlalocan (the earthly paradise of the Aztecs), or in Tlaloc (the rain god's abode). These places are full of happiness, filled with fields of corn, pumpkins, chili peppers, tomatoes, beans, and flowers.

The Chichihuahco is a place for deceased children, those who had no prior life, meaning that they died within their first year. Their food is from trees whose fruits are the breasts of mothers, from which milk flows. In addition to worlds and homes, there are also dimensions. There are nine dimensions in which the dead live. Among them is the dimension of Mictlan, in which there is a river of overflowing black water (a symbol of human feelings). To cross this river, the deceased needs the Xolotl — a dog that their relatives sacrifice for them.

Latin American belief therefore converges with that of ancient Egypt regarding the journey after death.

Mexico is known for its varied table. Perhaps, the most important festive occasion is not for the living, but for the dead. Although making offerings with foods that the dead loved is common (as in ancient Egypt), there is food that is traditional and representative of this ritual. We can mention ten of them here.

The first is the bread of the dead which, although the National Institute of Anthropology and History claims to be of colonial origin, many argue that it predates the Spanish presence in Latin America. What matters here are its shape and meaning — it is a round loaf that symbolizes the cycle of life and death. In the middle, there is a circular shape representing the skull, and four lines of cinnamon are sprinkled on it representing the bones of the four limbs and the tears shed on the deceased. They also refer to the four cardinal points, each one headed by a deity.

Then comes the pumpkin dessert, covered with fruit and caramel, which is considered one of the most famous traditional sacramental dishes; and the hawthorn dessert (that resembles the Egyptian zalabya), which is a widely used fruit of Mexican origin. Cinnamon is also included in its ingredients with sugar water.

There is the mole, which is made of chocolate and can take different shapes; the tamales, stuffed with vegetables or sweets; and the sugar coffin, another candy about half the size of the palm of the hand, used to artistically decorate offerings.

Other foods include dry fruits, of which the offerings are rich, usually sugarcane, oranges, and apples. Finally, there is hot chocolate poured on cornflakes, which represents a long tradition in the Mexican funeral rite. In recent times, the food has been accompanied by drinks such as water, milk, and Coca-Cola, in addition to different types of wines and tequila.

What is remarkable here about the food of the dead is that it is an extension of the food of the living, as if the deceased, in the other life, desired what they enjoyed in this one.

Similarities

The Islamic, Egyptian, and Mexican civilizations (representing Latin America) resemble each other in the belief that there is no real death. The exit of the spirit from the body does not mean that it vanishes. Instead, there is an interlude — similar to rest — between two lives.

Whether the deceased embarks on a celestial journey with their body and spirit, whether their body remains in the grave while the spirit travels, or the spirit is separated from the body and then returns on Judgment Day, there is harmony in believing that human beings, at the end of their life, will dwell in paradise and that, during their immortal existence, they will feast on appetizing food, similar to that of earthly life, but more delicious.

There is agreement on the idea of sacramental offering which, after all, consists of food offered both to the divinity and to the spirit of the deceased, or to accompany them on their celestial journey.

What does that mean for us? In a way, civilizations are like banging pots: what rings in one pot echoes in another. It means that humankind has been preoccupied with the same questions since ancient times and has created its own myths to avoid the fear of death.

The imagination through which it built those other worlds has helped it to achieve justice on earth, or to do good. The promised paradise in myths, taken as a whole, represents the most beautiful thing that can be found in the world, especially food; a pleasure that is sometimes permissible and at other times forbidden.

Ahmed Abdel Latif *is an Egyptian journalist, writer, and translator.*

Intermittent Fasting, Zen Style: Not Eating in the Buddhist Tradition

By Rev. Fausto Taiten Guareschi

because we live on the charity of the whole world, and it is right that we serve the whole world...

Alessandro Manzoni, The Betrothed

On his stay near Savatthi in the forest of Jeta, in the Hermitage of Anathapindika, the Tathagata ('He who thus comes,' one of the ten epithets of a Buddha) took the opportunity to exhort his disciples. 'Oh beggars, I, therefore, take food only once a day: By taking food only once a day, I keep health and freshness and vigor and strength and well-being. Now you too, monks, take food only once a day: By taking food only once a day, you monks will also keep health and freshness and vigor and strength and well-being.' (Majjhima Nikaya, 65: Bhaddalisutta).

This exhortation implies that the Sangha, the community that draws inspiration from and follows his Dharma (or law) often provides only two meals a day: a breakfast at about six am and a lunch before noon. In Zen Soto monasteries dinner is called 'yakuseki kitto' (or 'medicinal stone'), because in ancient times the evening custom was to place a hot stone at the level of the stomach pit.

Even today the tradition is that part of the day is dedicated to the meal and part to fasting. The coexistence of a meal and fasting is to emphasize cultivating a non-dualistic attitude where opposites are not removed or obfuscated but realized. This way of taking meals is an expression of the Middle Way, Chu Do, inaugurated by the historical Buddha.

Prince Siddhartha, Lady Sujata, and the Rice Bowls

When he left his father's palace, Siddhartha, the prince who was to become Buddha, undertook a strict ascetic practice. He went to extremes, decreasing every day the grains of rice he was eating until, according to legend, his sternum could be seen from behind, his ribs looked transparent, and he was reduced to practically nothing.

It was then that, judging the asceticism aimed at the body alone as useless, he suddenly decided to restore his strength. At first, he got up and looked for clothes to cover himself with, since what he was wearing had been ruined. He took the shroud of a corpse or, according to another tradition, was handed it by a dying old woman, washed it, and put it on. Then he looked for something to eat. A pious woman, Sujata, who had made a vow to bring to the sacred tree of Ajapala a bowl of rice seasoned with spices if she found a good husband, was going there to fulfill her promise, preceded by her maid Purna.

The maid found the Bodhisattva and advised her mistress to give him the rice, which was in a golden bowl. The mistress consented and the Bodhisattva accepted the gift. He washed himself in the river and, after washing, divided the rice into forty-nine portions so that it would suffice for the next seven weeks, consuming the first portion.

This was enough to restore his color and his strength. He threw the precious bowl into the river and, instead of going downstream as might be expected, the bowl went downstream — to reunite with the bowls of three previous Buddhas. This is a symbol of 'effects' beyond samsara in the sphere of the 'causes' — Dharma-dathu, or the realm of phenomena — where Dharma reigns.

In the Fushuku Hanpo (or 'The Meal Rule'), Dogen Zenji (1200-1253), who together with Keizan Zenji (1268-1325) founded the Soto Zen Order, says that 'Dharma is meals and meals are Dharma.' The first verses of the prayer that is recited during a meal illustrate the highlights of Shakyamuni's life:

Born in Kapila. The Way he reveals to Maghada.

Dharma he teaches in Harana.

The Nirvana he enters in Kuchira.

The Oryoki of the Tathagata now opens

in the common vow of those who offer and receive, quiet and calm, an empty gift.

The path, the way, connects the origin with outcome, i.e. eternal life. By embarking on the path, which at every step embraces and realizes truth and life, the practitioner (or 'samnyasin') runs up an insurmountable debt that indefinitely extends his distance from the world. This is the distance of the 'sramana', the authentic renouncer; it is with the world but not of it.

'If yoga is the "renunciation" (samnyasa) of doings, this renunciation consists essentially in the abandonment of the notion "I am the one who acts."' (Ananda Coomaraswamy).

Being in the Monastic Life

The quotation from Majjhima Nikaya summarizes a specific orientation of the Soto Tradition by recalling the three elementary principles, or 'nyoho', that determine the spirit and lifestyle of a monastery: living, dressing, and eating following Dharma. It is difficult to be able to speak of food without giving due consideration also to living, as an economic law, and to wearing the dress of mercy that, as a form of eternal peace, holds us all with the arms of wisdom and compassion, and allows us to resist and better accept hunger, cold, and heat.

In most of our monasteries, mealtime takes place in ritual form. Before consuming the food, we turn our thoughts to everything that has contributed to the acquisition and preparation of the dishes through the recitation of the five meditations, 'gokan no ge'.

Countless works and efforts have given us this food.

Are our virtue and exercise worthy of this gift?

Anger, craving, ignorance always stand in the way of a sincere and pure heart.

This food is a gift that restores life, that gives life to life.

For the Way to be revealed, we now receive this food.

A complex and refined ritual prepares us for the Sacrament and the Mystery. It exposes us to a charity that systematically bursts, breaking the means-goals vector, and so leaving us open to the charms of the numinous.

Food is, and constantly becomes, the path to eternal life. Food is the great opportunity for fraternal charity, peacemaking, and alliance.

The place and time of the community (or Sangha) become the occasion of the Buddha-Dharma, and together they contribute to forming the Three Treasures — the main object of veneration. Ananda asked the Master, 'The Sangha, the company, the community, what is it? Is it half of holiness?' The Lord Buddha replied, 'No! It is all holiness.'

The members of the community are bound by an obligation that makes them dependent on the community, debtors to a world they have left which nonetheless, more than ever, they feel they belong to.

In the three worlds of perennial drift, it is an arduous task to be rid of every debt, but after leaving that world, the grateful obligation is indeed revealed. So says the verse that responds and accompanies the cutting of the last strand of hair during the Rite of Ordination.

The restitution of what is due — a remnant that always remains due, no matter how much effort is made to remove it — begins with the exaltation of what is beautiful to see and remember: Buddha was born in Kapila, and in Harana he set in motion the Wheel of Dharma.

But why is food one of the fundamental elements — always mythologized — which goes beyond the dimension of survival and functionality?

'Man shall not live by bread alone.' (Matthew 4: 3-4). This metaphorization of food is constantly emergent.

In the act of eating, humans always have the opportunity to come up against the relationship with the transcendent and their relationship with their own community.

Dogen Zenji in the Shobogenzo Zuimonki quotes an ancient teacher: 'The late Abbot Eisai used to say, 'The brothers of this community should not think that I am providing them with food and clothing. These are gifts that come from heaven. Each person receives the portion reserved to him during his life. You don't have to try to get more, nor do you have to feel indebted to me for that...

'For Buddha-Dharma to flourish in our time, it is necessary to live in a quiet place without having to worry about food and clothing. Practicing Buddha-Dharma, once we are safe from these necessities, will generate great merits.

'If any community were to come together with the intent to study, none of them would manage to awaken their minds to The Way. If the attachment to personal profit or the desire for goods and riches remain, it will be difficult to find even one community that truly seeks The Way,' Dogen Zenji continued.

'The Way, the path, is not difficult, it is sufficient not to prefer or oppose.' (Shin jin mei, 'Epigraphs on the Spirit of the Faith of the Third Chinese Patriarch Kanchi Sosan' – 606).

Fasting is not opposed to eating. We can therefore admit that there is no human being who can suffice for themselves. No one is required to carry all the weight of the world on their shoulders. Unburdening your shoulders from excessive weight is necessary to be able to sit up straight in zazen (as Zen meditation is called).

There are three methods to remedy humans from sin — prayer, fasting, and fraternal charity — and they are all indispensable to each other. Virtue is not to be exhibited. Idolatry is the great temptation that can afflict the believer as well as the unbeliever. Intransigence is one of the aspects that may lead to confusion.

The Tathagata also took this risk. So, one of the great interpreters of the recent history of Zen Soto, Taisen Deshimaru Roshi, does not hesitate to formulate a precious warning: 'To be afraid, to be scared... Of whom, of what? Of the Cosmic Order, Shobo. There's nothing else to fear. Fear it and respect it.'

He goes further: 'To bash on a single object, to harbor the slightest prejudice, to pursue a purpose however tenuous inevitably distances us from the authenticity [of zazen]. And even he who wears a habit, respects the precepts, conducts a rigorous practice, if he pursues the slightest object, he will only indulge in error, in a mortifying and selfish or at least dogmatic attitude.'

***Fausto Taiten Guareschi** was president of the Italian Buddhist Union and is the Founder of the Fudenji Temple and Monastery.*

Mummified Alive:
Fasting in the Sokushinbutsu Tradition

By Wakako Saito

Much like other peoples around the world, the Japanese live everyday chasing their own happiness. However, as Buddha preached, the truth of life is made of 'sho', 'ro', 'byo', and 'shi', which mean 'birth', 'old age', 'illness', and 'death.' For this reason, we have 'ku' or 'suffering.'

Faith can go a long way in helping us overcome these pivotal experiences; in fact, one can argue that the true nature of humankind is to help one another through mercy and by practicing Buddhist wisdom.

However, is faith still relevant in Japanese society today? Most Japanese live mainly in cities; they are busy with work and daily life, and they are distracted by their smartphones, computers, and a rapidly changing technological world, robbing them of any chance to focus on anyone else. This world — permeated by individualism — can easily undermine the happiness of each individual and of society as a whole.

The core of Japanese religion is Shintoism, or the belief that there is divinity in different elements of nature, which influenced Buddhism — a faith that originated in India and was later exported to China and Korea, reaching Japan in AD 538.

Japanese Buddhism teaches us that a person can spiritually evolve into a Sokushinbutsu — 'Sokushin' means 'immediately' or 'as is' and 'butsu' means 'Buddha' — i.e. a Buddha. In more specific terms, the Sokushinbutsu are Buddhist monks who engaged in an ancient Japanese practice in which they fasted and abstained from all pleasures and any worldly activities as a form of sacrifice to spiritually guarantee the happiness and salvation of others. It was also a way for practitioners to one day ascend to Godhood by becoming the Buddha after their inevitable death.

By meticulously feeding and taking care of their bodies to eliminate fats and liquids according to a precise schedule, they could reach death without any corruption in their flesh in a kind of self-mummification.

The area with the highest concentration of Sokushinbutsu is the Shonai region of Yamagata Prefecture in northern Japan.

The six main Sokushinbutsu of the Edo period (1603 - 1868) lived around Mount Yudono, one of the three sacred mountains of Dewa. This spiritual path is said to have been introduced by the monk Kobodaishi Kukai (774 - 835).

Giving One's All for the Happiness of Those Who Suffer

Why was there this desire to become a Sokushinbutsu? As humans we are limited and that is precisely why we need to help others. It is important to realize that the Sokushinbutsu wanted to sacrifice themselves for the happiness of all who suffered; no exceptions.

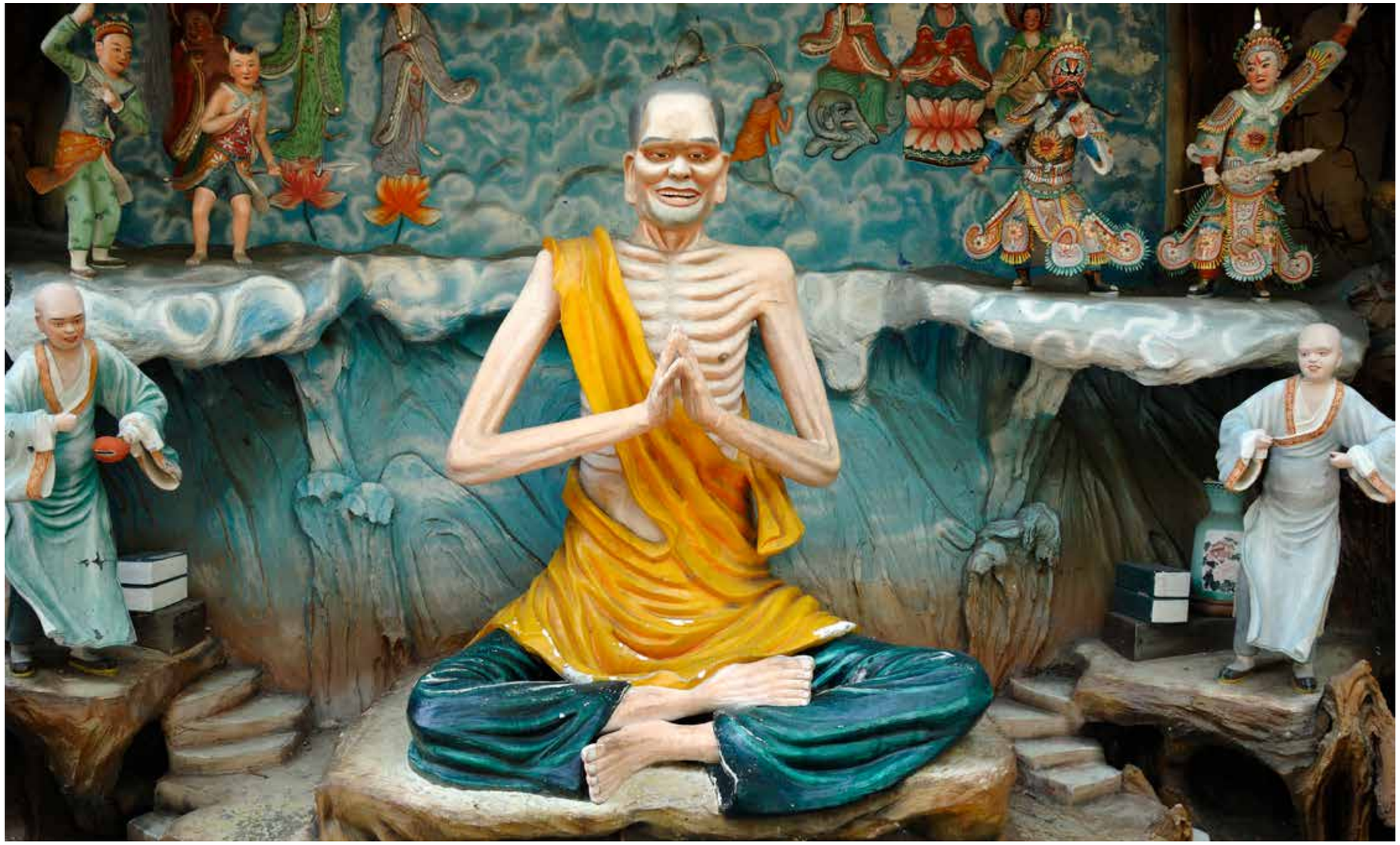
However, it was necessary to follow a penitential process — such as a very strict fast — in order to prepare the body and prevent it from decaying. The Sokushinbutsu is said to be in a state of perpetual meditation to help people — a meditation that will last for 5.67 billion years (i.e. the life span of the sun). At the end of this period, the Buddha of the hereafter (Maitreya) will appear in place of the actual Buddha.

Even today, the bodies of the Sokushinbutsu are kept in Buddhist temples, where many people come to pray before them for help in their pursuit of happiness.

One such Sokushinbutsu is Shinnyokai Shonin (1687 - 1783), who is venerated in the Dainichibo Temple. Shinnyokai became a monk in his youth and made a vow to turn the unjust society of his time into a prosperous and peaceful one, through the Buddha.

He worked intensively for the happiness of the people by building temples, offering help to the needy, and working for social welfare. Then, in 1783, amid a great famine in Japan, the ninety-six-year-old Shinnyokai made his final sacrifice and became a Sokushinbutsu.

Though many years have passed since, people still come to pray at the Dainichibo Temple to be granted happiness and aid through his body. Also, the temple's denizens change his robes every six years, cut up the old fabric into smaller pieces, and distribute them as amulets.



In areas of Japan where there is a lot of moisture, the body tends to rot during the transformation process. The cause of putrefaction is the presence of oil and water in the body, and it is therefore necessary to prepare it through rigorous practice so that it does not rot after death.

In order to overcome the unimaginable difficulties of these steps, it was necessary to have overwhelming strength and desire to sacrifice oneself for others, but above all, incredible willpower.

In practice, there was a methodical process to the act of sacrifice, which was achieved through a series of steps:

The Five Seeds Fast (1,000 days)

For 1,000 days, the ascetic commits to walking in the mountains to reduce fats and liquids in his body and eliminates five types of seeds from his vegetarian diet — rice, barley, wheat, red beans, and soybeans.

The Ten Seeds Fast and Mountain Plant Diet (1,000 days)

In the following 1,000 days, the monk adjusts his routine by abstaining from five more types of seeds and introduce mountain plants into the diet: nuts, bark boiled in hot water to create medicinal herbs, tree roots, wild plants, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots.

The monk then distributes to the poor everything that he gains from reciting the sutras and all the food donated to him by people to thank him.

Ingesting Lacquer (A few days before death)

When the time of death approaches, lacquer that's been extracted from the bark of a tree is mixed with the monk's tea. This substance is toxic and causes vomiting so that even more water is expelled from the body. The lacquer also has the subsequent function of preventing the body from decomposing.

Burial (The last day)

A particular stone chamber is built three meters underground, where the monk sits on a wooden box while fasting and continuing to pray. Charcoal is then spread around the stone chamber to remove any moisture, and a thick bamboo tube is inserted in the chamber to allow the passage of air from the outside.

Another thin bamboo tube is placed inside the chamber and tied with a rope to a bell outside to confirm the ascetic monk's survival. When the bell stops ringing, it means that death has arrived. Once that happens, the bamboo tube is removed, and the chamber is completely sealed and buried.

The Removal of the Ascetic Monk's Body (1,000 days)

The monk is dug out of the ground, and if his body has not decomposed, it means that he has become a Sokushinbutsu.

It is worth noting that this practice is now prohibited by Japanese law.

While a mummy is artificially created by extracting internal organs from a dead body that is then embalmed, a Sokushinbutsu is a person who, after rigorous training, removes fat and water from his body, prevents the occurrence of putrefactive bacteria, and then goes underground to meet his demise through a long fast. He is then dug out of the earth about three years after his death. In this case, the brain, skin, and internal organs remain untampered with.

Aside from fasting, ascetic monks — even those that have no wish to become a Sokushinbutsu — also engage in a practice called 'mizugyo.' To be one with the Buddha or other deities, the body is purified by bathing in the cold water of rivers, seas, and waterfalls.

This method can be found not only in Buddhism but also in Shintoism — the creed that existed even before the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century and was closely linked to the imperial system (the religious beliefs of the Japanese people can be said to be a mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism).

At several points in history, the Sokushinbutsu offered their lives to save people from famines, natural disasters, and epidemics. It was a humbler time when people knew their limits and did not depend on science as much as they do today.

While the ascetic practice of becoming a Sokushinbutsu is definitely outdated, one hopes that the essence of the ritual lives on forevermore: the idea that one life can be connected to several others in so many ways other than the obvious, tangible ones; and the idea that another individual's happiness can also be our own.

The pandemic years and the recent world crisis can be an opportunity for all of us to recognize again the importance of faith and showing mercy towards our neighbors.

Wakako Saito *is professor of Italian language and culture, religion, and human dignity at the University of Aichigakui in Japan.*

Fasting in the Sixties: An Iraqi Tale of Coexistence

By Inaam Kachachi

When lentils used to appear on the table every day, sided by nothing but dry bread, it was a sign for us children that our mothers and aunts had started Lent. Forty days of abstinence from meat, living on bread soaked in unsweetened tea or lentil soup cooked without fat or broth. I do not remember if my father observed the fast with them. What I know for sure is that the whole family used to fast on Good Friday, in remembrance of Christ's crucifixion, peace be upon him.

Great Lent, for Chaldean Christians, begins on the day called Ash Wednesday and lasts six weeks before Easter. It is about doing as Christ did when he fasted for forty days in the desert. It is also an opportunity to pray, be charitable, re-educate the soul, and learn to endure dietary austerity.

I have heard that in the days of the early Christians, it was permitted to eat fish because it was the meal of the poor fishermen in the Sea of Galilee. My mother, on the other hand, forbade it and repeated her sarcastic phrase every season: 'Today, fish is for the rich. Can today's poor afford a grilled carp for three dinars?'

Those were the days of wealth, when the dinar was stronger than Samson before Delilah tricked him and cut off his hair. If only you knew, Mother — resting in your fine place — that fish today cost thousands of dinars.

The faithful used to perform the ritual of the Way of Sorrows in remembrance of the journey that Jesus, son of Mary, made from the Lion's Gate to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, carrying the cross, while the Jews tortured him. A procession imitated by Christian believers in many parts of the world. On the walls of ancient churches, the fourteen stations of the Way of Sorrows are depicted.

Usually, one of the priests, or a young man, volunteers to play the role of Christ. The audience accompanies him as he walks with a heavy cross through the alleys and paths until he reaches the door of the church. Some of them take the ceremonies to extremes and go so far as to have nails driven into their palms. Others soil their bodies with mud as a symbol of sadness. These scenes can be seen on television and are performed by some believers in Latin America and the Philippines, but here in our country, I have not seen them.

Ramadan and Lent

The fasting of Lent broadly consists of depriving oneself of good food — a very elastic concept. Some people abstain from chicken because it is a type of meat but turn a blind eye to boiled eggs. I heard my aunts joke about a famous fact dating from before I was born.

The Archbishop of Basra, Youssef Kuki, had visited my uncle during one of his rounds to check on the faithful. During the conversation, my aunt Najma started to ask why eggs were allowed during the fast while chicken was forbidden, although eggs come from a chicken's body. The bishop smiled, out of compassion, and did not answer.

In the Sunday mass that followed that visit, he began his homily by saying, 'Some fools ask me why chicken is forbidden and eggs are allowed,' then he went on, looking at my aunts sitting in the front row, who, lowering their gaze, held back the laughter that would later resound thunderous throughout the house. The story was then passed on from grandmother to mother and from mother to daughter.

We grew up in Baghdad's society that was exemplary in tolerance. We lived the atmosphere of Ramadan with our neighbors who, in return, wished us well on our holidays. We would exchange traditional dishes. At Christmas, we would save portions of date and nut-filled pastries for them and they would send us our share of Abbas bread or the 'al-qeema' dish — typical dishes of the Ashura holiday.

My mother kept an old image of the Virgin Mary that she had inherited. They called her 'Mother of Wonders' because she never disappointed the hope of her worshippers. Such was faith. Our Muslim neighbors, Umm Omar and Umm Khadija would come to bless the framed image of the Virgin and offer their vows to 'our Mary.'

Even as a child, I saw gold chains dangling from the corners of that image, and there were those who recommended keeping it in a heavy frame of pure silver. The candles in front of the image remained lit day and night. When one candle went out, another was lit; until my mother died and my brothers and sisters dispersed, each to a different country.

I visited my mother in one of the last years of the unjust siege of Iraq. I entered the room to get the blessing of the miraculous image. I was dismayed to see her stripped of the gold of her vows. My mother turned her face away from my questioning eyes. I heard her say that she had sold the gold because the Virgin didn't need it, but our neighbor, Umm Khadija, needed it for her dialysis sessions. The news shocked me, and I hugged my mother, mixing my tears with hers. In a later moment, I captured this scene in one of the chapters of my novel, 'The American Granddaughter'.

Some of my relatives do custom fasting. Some of them abstain from meat and dairy products on the Wednesday of each week. Often it is a vow to make something come true. That is the reason why the expression: 'May God grant you what you want' is often said in those cases. They pray for the healing of a sick husband or for the success of a child who is struggling with their studies or for the arrival of a long-awaited spouse.

There is a special fast for Saint Fatima. Seven Wednesdays on which the faster eats nothing but bread and tea. Although the faster likes tea, the deprivation from the other food makes the tea bitter to their taste. That is why they call it the impossible fast. But those who adhere to it believe that they will get everything they want, which is why they endure the stress.

I have a friend from Kirkuk who promised to fast Ramadan with Muslims if her only son returned safely from the Kuwait war. Her son returned with a splinter in his leg. When he recovered, my friend fulfilled her vow.

Jonah, the Whale, and Google

I like the traditions of the Nineveh fast — the fast of penance that lasts three days. Followers of the Eastern Churches adhere to it. Perhaps it is a way of remembering the plague epidemic in Iraq during the seventh century AD. At the time, the patriarch and the bishops had started practicing fasting and prayer, hoping to stop the contagion. Heaven answered their prayers and the disease stopped, and they still commemorate that memory there, every year to this day.

Google, however, gives another explanation, namely that the fasting in Nineveh may symbolize the story of the prophet Jonah, or Younis, when he was sent by the Lord to spread the word to the people of Nineveh, but was afraid of them and ran away. According to the biblical account, Jonah threw himself into the river and was swallowed by a whale for three days. He prayed to the Lord to save him from the whale's hunger, and his prayers were met. So, he returned to Nineveh to urge his people to obey and fear God. That is why the inhabitants of Nineveh, now Mosul, practice this fast in particular. Some among them go so far as to abstain from food for three whole days.

After the three days, the ritual involves making a special dessert called 'khidr Ilyas' — a mixture of sugar, flour, cardamom, and minced nuts. The ingredients are boiled over low heat, stirring continuously until they thicken. Afterward, they are left to cool and firm up on a tray.

We used to gather around the table, with the smell of cardamom filling the house, we would watch my mother cut the cake with a large knife and divide it into portions for relatives and neighbors. When we were young, we could chew it, but if we tried to do it today, we would likely lose a few teeth.

Many families have stopped making this cake at home, especially since all those good mothers have died, and you can buy the ready-made cake in souks like the one in Al-Shorja and in various pastry shops.

I grew up under the care of two parents who had a welcoming faith. They passed on to us the precepts of belief without forcing us, once we reached puberty, to adhere to any religious practice.

We knew that we were Christians and that there was a church that our mother attended on Sundays. We used to go there with her when we were small, and we continued through university until we started our working lives. Among us, there were those who fasted, each according to his own beliefs and trends. No one was ever punished for not abiding by the fast. Punishments only came to those who lied, stole, or hurt others unjustly.

I studied at the nuns' school in Baghdad. We would go into the chapel and read a short prayer before class. Our Muslim classmates would stand there with us, whispering the opening sura and rubbing their faces with their hands.

During my middle school years, I was invited with five other hard-working schoolmates to sleep over at the nuns' during the three days before Easter — Holy Thursday, Holy Friday, and Holy Saturday — which fall at the end of the Pentecost fast and end on Sunday, the day of the feast. We were happy to have such a different experience. We spent hours walking in the courtyards of the school and the adjacent convent with the rosary in our hands, rolling the beads and reciting the prayers.

On the afternoon of Holy Saturday, we were surprised to see the nuns shedding their veil of sorrow to celebrate the feast and prepare a hearty dinner, because, according to Christian belief, that was the moment when Christ was resurrected, or so it is thought.

Over the decades, much of the fragrance of tolerance with which we lived and grew up has dissipated. Politics has interfered with religion, and the cancer of sectarianism has eaten away the minds of many. However, when I am overwhelmed by regret and nostalgia, I pick up the phone and listen to that sweet traditional song from Mosul that says: 'You follow your religion and I follow mine… You read your Bible and I read my Quran… You fast your fifty days and I fast my thirty.'

Inaam Kachachi *is an Iraqi novelist and journalist.*

Parable of the Victuals: Metaphorical and Literal Meanings of Food

By Ezzat El-Qamhawy

Grace and gratitude are the essence of the relationship between the Lord and his servant. This relationship is well symbolized by bread and wine, which were used as sacramental offerings in pre-Islamic religions. Although Islam has abandoned these rites, Muslims never stopped sanctifying bread — a symbol they have in common with adherents of other religions.

A Muslim who sees any food thrown around may pay no attention to it. Only a crumb of bread would make them bend down and pick it up. They would shake off the dirt, bring it to their lips, kiss it, then respectfully place it against a wall, so that no one would inadvertently step on it.

Bread and Salt

Betrayal of 'bread and salt' — i.e. the experience of having shared them — is considered the height of immorality and lack of religion and morals.

Bread and salt are a metaphorical reference to food, since the act of eating creates a bond that resembles the blood tie between siblings; afterwards, treachery is not permissible. Therefore, reconciliation sessions between litigants in the practice of customary law always end with a joint meal as proof of the end of enmity.

The Meccans call bread by the same name used by Egyptians: 'aish', literally: 'life.' In Egyptian homes, kneading begins in the middle of the night or at dawn — the most peaceful and blessed moment of the day, the time of the night or dawn prayer. The kneading of bread at this time is finely documented in Arab literature.

In Abdel Hakim Qasem's novel 'The Seven Days of Man', kneading begins in that mysterious and blessed hour. The boy Abd Al-Aziz opens his eyes and sees his father changing his clothes before going to the dawn prayer at the mosque. Then he hears his mother waking up his sisters: 'Wake up, girl, you and her! Dawn has broken, we must make bread.'

In Qasem's novel, making bread is the most important preparation for the journey from the village to the city of Tanta to attend the mawlid of the Sufi saint Al-Badawi. The women prepare enough food for the travelers to feed them on the

days of celebration and more food to feed the dervishes and friends of the mawlid, who come from different governorates of Egypt and are met by Hajj Karim, the host of that annual celebration.

Apart from the specificity of the ceremony in 'The Seven Days of Man', baking in general is a woman's prayer and a symbol of her dedication to serving her family. It is a work in which the instinct of love intersects with duty and obedience — to God and husband.

Before Qasem, it was Naguib Mahfouz who documented in 'Bayn Al-Qaṣrayn' (or 'Palace Walk') — the first novel in his famous 'Trilogy' — the close connection of kneading bread with the dawn prayer.

'In the stillness of the early morning, when the trail of dawn erupts in darts of light, rises the sound of kneading from the oven room on the patio, a series of consecutive strokes like drumming. Amina had already left the bed about half an hour ago, did her ablutions, prayed, and then gone down to the oven room and woken up Umm Hanafi.'

Baking and cooking are the most important elements in the construction of the character of the mother, Amina. Table seating and eating rituals reflect the overall social arrangement in the house. Although the father, Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd Al-Jawwad, has become an immortal literary archetype thanks to his double (or inconsistent) personality, divided between his frowning and severe presence at home and his relaxed and libertine presence during evenings away from home, we always see him eating at home. The novel says nothing about the food consumed in his evening vigils, limiting those to drinking.

Breakfast is the only meal that Al-Sayyid Ahmad eats with the family, as he eats his lunch alone and goes out to his shop before the children return from school. This shared meal is very burdensome for the children. They succumb to the scrutinizing looks of their father to the extent that their enjoyment of the food is spoiled. They don't touch the food until he leaves the table, as he is quick to eat and fill up.

But his breakfast does not end when he rises from the table. After washing his hands, he enters his room. Amina joins him holding a cup in which three raw eggs are mixed with some milk which he sips before his coffee. While he quickly eats the food prepared for the whole family, this part of his breakfast seems to remain a secret. Amina recharges his masculinity with a cup of raw eggs, away from the kids' eyes, as if it were something to be ashamed of.

An Erotic Prerogative

Perhaps Mahfouz was inspired by the Tunisian judge and scholar Sheikh Al-Nafzawi with this detail of Al-Sayyid's breakfast, but regardless of what the latter says about it the positive effect of eggs on sexual intercourse is a well-established trope in society and in the popular imagination, reiterated without the need to draw on the books of eroticism.

In 'The Perfumed Garden', Al-Nafzawi mentions eggs in the title of the last chapter, in which he deals with various types of food: 'On the Benefits of Eggs and Drinks that Help with Sexual Intercourse'. He concentrates on the 'mikhakh', which means 'yolk,' taken in the morning on an empty stomach.

The sheikh mixes eggs with crushed onions and their juice. He recommends it grilled as well, with cinnamon and pepper. He also recommends a tajine of eggs fried in ghee, then covered with honey and eaten with some bread. Or raw egg yolks with spices, placed on top of boiled asparagus after the latter is fried in ghee.

Al-Nafzawi is not the only one who mentions the magical powers of eggs. There is a consensus on this matter in Arab books of eroticism. Some devote a section to recipes for foods and drinks that enhance sexual potency, while others report exciting tales that describe miraculous performances thanks to recipes based on eggs and onions.

The Arab fantasy par excellence 'A Thousand and One Nights', which should really not be read in public, is part of that erotic tradition. The abundance of food in 'A Thousand and One Nights' seems to be a way in which the unknown authors of that work captivate the impoverished listeners of their stories. But food's most important role in that collection of stories goes beyond its superficial function as a sweet and exciting narrative spice. It is a key component in building the narrative.

In the tale of 'The Porter and the Girls' (the fifth night), a woman wrapped in a loincloth from Mosul stops by a porter and says, 'Take your basket and follow me.' The sumptuous meat, sweets, and fruit purchased by the woman seem to anticipate and promise an exciting night.

In many of these stories, the plot revolves around food. On it falls the burden of explaining the riddle of the dismembered corpse of a girl found in a box pulled in with the fisherman's net. The tale begins with Harun Al-Rashid and his minister Jaafar Al-Barmaki meeting one night with a fisherman returning from a fishing trip sad and empty-handed.

The two propose that they should go with him out to sea to cast his net. Whatever he captured, the caliph would buy. The net, however, is pulled in with the woman's corpse inside it and the caliph orders his minister to look for her killer. When Ja'far fails to find him, the caliph orders him to be crucified on the palace door. The murderer, seeing the minister in those conditions, takes pity and confesses his crime.

He is the dead woman's husband, her lover, and her cousin, and he killed her because he was suspicious of her behavior. The young wife was sick and craved apples out of season, so he traveled a long way and brought her three apples from the caliph's orchard in Baghdad in what looked like a miracle.

After he left her, he went to his shop and sat down immersed in work, and behold, a servant passed in front of him with an apple. The husband asked him, 'Where did you get it?' To which the servant replied, 'From my mistress. Her cuckold husband brought it to her from the caliph's garden in Baghdad.' The husband had no choice but to go home and kill his wife.

At this point, Al-Barmaki asks

for a search to be made for the slave, but he fails again. However, he sees an apple protruding from the pocket of his youngest daughter. He asks her about it, and she says that it was a gift from one of their servants.

After questioning the servant, it becomes clear that he lied, as he stole the apple from the son of the murdered woman. The boy had begun to cry and beg for it to be returned to her because his father had brought it from the caliph's garden for his sick mother.

In the tale of 'Minister Nur Al-Din and His Brother' (the nineteenth night), a family spread out between Basra, Damascus, and Cairo reunites thanks to a dish of 'pomegranate seeds.' The two brothers, Nur Al-Din and Shams Al-Din, inherit their father's ministerial position in the court of the Sultan of Egypt.

One day they sit imagining the future and agree to strengthen their brotherhood through intermarriage. They begin dreaming of marrying on the same night and having a boy and a girl, respectively. They would grow up and the boy would marry the girl. But then the two brothers quarrel over the unborn girl's dowry.

Because of their quarrel, the younger Shams Al-Din leaves for Basra. There, he becomes a minister and gives birth to Hasan, while Nur Al-Din, in Egypt, gives birth to Sitt Al-Husn.

Then Shams Al-Din dies and is survived by Hasan, whom the Sultan of Basra entrusts to succeed his father. In Egypt, Sitt Al-Husn grows up and the Sultan seeks her for himself, but her father refuses due to the difference in age, so the Sultan forces him to marry her to an elderly, hunchbacked groom.

On the night of the wedding, two demons cooperate to transfer Hasan to his cousin's bed. That night she gets pregnant, and before dawn, the two demons fly off with Hasan to take him back to Basra.

Nine months after that night, Sitt Al-Husn gives birth to a son, whom she names Ajib. When grows into a boy, the other children start insulting him, saying that he was born to an unknown father. Sitt Al-Husn then searches for Hasan's turban, which he forgot the night of their meeting. She finds his address in Basra in the turban's lining then leaves with her father and the boy to meet him.

Arriving in Basra, they find Hasan's mother crying over the death of her husband and because her son is lost. She goes out to look for him with them. On the way back, the family stops to rest in Damascus. Ajib goes out with his servant to buy a bowl of pomegranate seeds in the same shop where he had bought that sweet during the stop on the outward journey. The paternal grandmother tastes the dessert and faints because she has the immediate certainty that it was her son who cooked that dish, having taught him that inimitable recipe!

The family is reunited, and we learn that a meteor hit the flying convoy on that distant wedding night. One of the two demons was burnt, and the second landed with Hasan on the outskirts of Damascus, where he found himself a job as a cook.

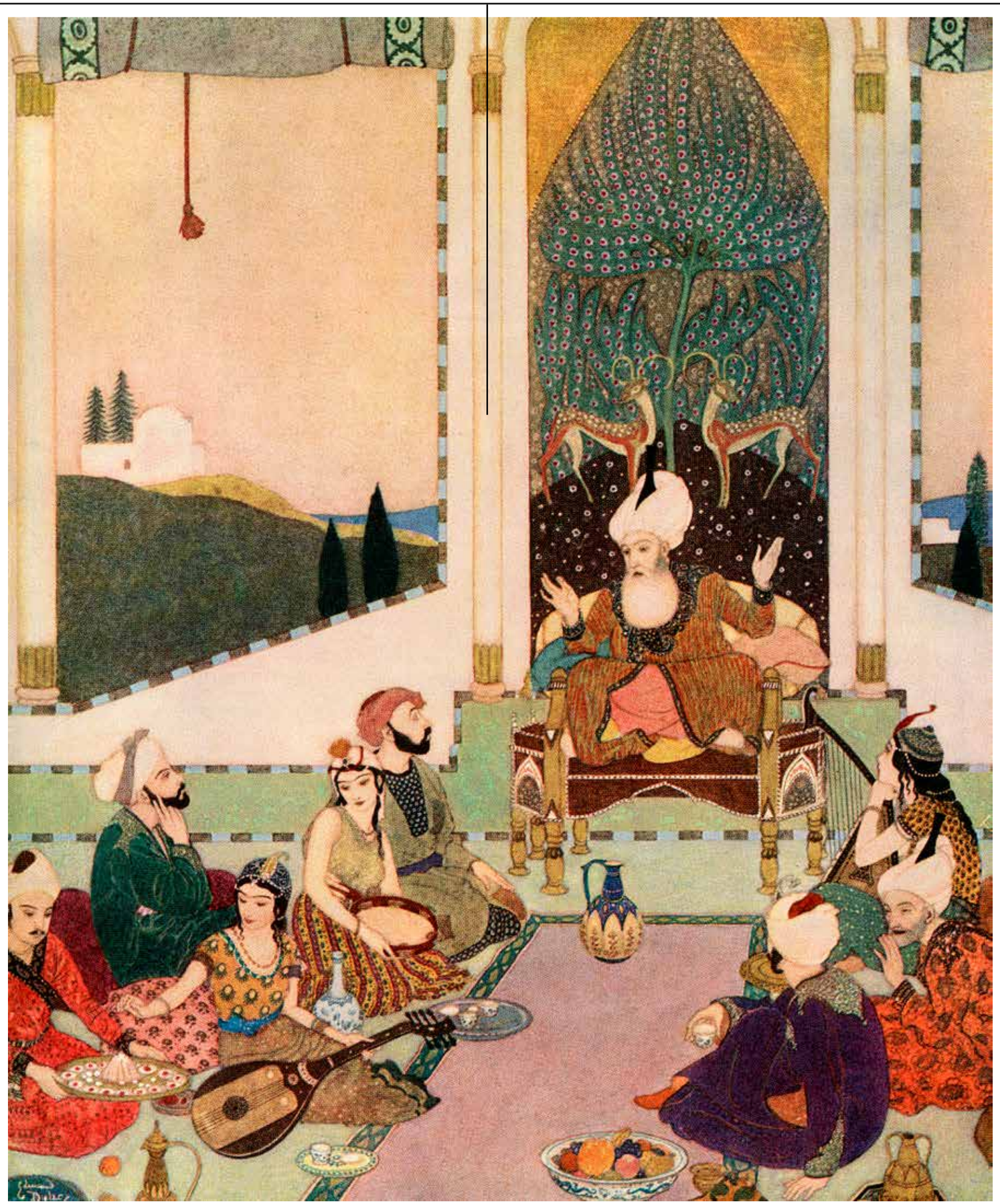
In the tale of 'Ali Shar and the Slave Girl Zumurrud' (the hundred and nineteenth night), another sweet dish brings together two lovers separated by the plots of thieves (from the three hundred and eighth night to the three hundred and twenty seventh). This is one of those tales full of action, police chases, and humor.

After a series of adventures, Zumurrud escapes from her captor disguised as a knight, until she reaches a distant city where she is chosen as the Sultana. Among her first decrees, she orders the kitchens to remain closed for a day every month, on which she offers a banquet to all the inhabitants and guests of the city and watches over the guests.

Among the etiquette of banquets in that city is the rule of reserving the dish of rice pudding for princes. Strangers do not know this secret, so the Sultana can recognize a stranger when they reach for this dish. In this way, she manages to hunt her enemies one after the other.

She also recognizes her lover Ali Shar, so she summons him to her room, and then announces that she would accompany him on a visit to his city from which she does not intend to return. It is one of the most beautiful stories about giving up power!

The funny thing is that 'A Thousand and One Nights', despite being full of



spreads and going into great detail to describe Shahrazad's wisdom and the stories of distant nations, remains silent on her personal habits, food preferences, and cooking skills. Could she have staved off the murderous king's anger, dish after dish, as she staved it off with tales?

The Way to a Man's Heart

Popular wisdom insists that the shortest way to a man's heart is his stomach. We can imagine what the cook Shahrazad could have done to convince Shahrayar to postpone her murder another day. Would she cook him something that was never quite ready? This option would have put her in greater danger, as hunger leads to anger, not curiosity. Could she have counted on her sister Dunyazad's support at the end of each meal?

Food, unlike narration, does not postpone satisfaction to the next meal. Nor can the principle of catching a man by the stomach apply to an angry, wealthy king. Thus, we are not able to test the effect of the food of the Lady of Tales on the hostile diner Shahrayar, but she does offer us the story of a woman who was able to save her honor from another king, for whom she prepared a table of ninety dishes (the nine hundred and eightieth night).

The woman was standing on the roof of her house when the king glimpsed her and decided he desired her. When he asked about her, he was told that she was the wife of his minister. He then sent the minister on a faraway mission and made his way into her house. When she saw the king in her house, she 'kissed the ground before his feet', as the book's recurrent expression has it, and welcomed him.

The king then expressed his desires and she tried to reject him, belittling herself as any chaste and fearful woman would. 'I'm not even good to serve as a maid to the king's last concubine; but, by God, I have the good fortune to incur the king's favor, even in my low status.'

Seeing him insist, she said to him, 'May the king grant his servant the favor of staying with her today, so that she can prepare him something to eat and drink.' And she brought him a book of sermons to read while she laid a table for him that proved far more effective than the book in diverting the king from her intent!

The minister's wife cooked ninety dishes of different colors, which she presented to the king and served on ninety gilt plates. He then began to take a bite from each plate, and he found the taste to be always the same. He was amazed by this, and then she explained: 'It is an allegory I prepared for you, because in your palace there are ninety maidens of different colors, and their taste is also the same.' So the king felt ashamed and left without harming her, but he left his ring under the pillow.

The woman's response reflects the widespread sexist view that all women are alike in bed, but the touch of femininity is evident in her delicate trick. She chose the long and difficult path, while she could have poisoned the king with only one dish. Perhaps, with this story, Shahrazad wanted to tell Shahrayar that killing is not the only available response to aggression or insult!

When the minister returned from his trip, he found the ring and recognized its owner. He was distressed, but he could do nothing. The most a husband can do against his wife when she is the mistress of a king is to leave her bed.

The minister's wife endured a year of abandonment (a year in the tale is the usual length for patiently enduring injustice, desire, or ignorance of a truth), after which she complained about her husband to her father, who in turn went up to the king to complain about her son-in-law, whom he found right there before him.

It was necessary to use allegories when talking to high-ranking people, so the father said, 'God save the king, I had a beautiful garden, planted with my own hands. I spent some of my money on it until it bore fruits and I had to pick them up. I gave it to this minister of yours who ate its fruits, as many as he wanted; then he refused it, refraining from entering it; so, it withered, lost its splendor, the flowers faded, and its appearance changed.'

The minister defended himself adhering to the same allegory. He admitted abandoning the garden after finding the lion's footprints, which made him fear for his life. So, he backed off. The king then put his fears to rest by saying, 'Return to your garden, unharmed and reassured, for the lion did not stay around.'

The tale warns us that honor and morality are relative issues that depend on the balance of power between the injurer and the injured. The tale ended with the minister's return to his garden, but we can imagine the end if the minister had been the harasser of the king's wife.

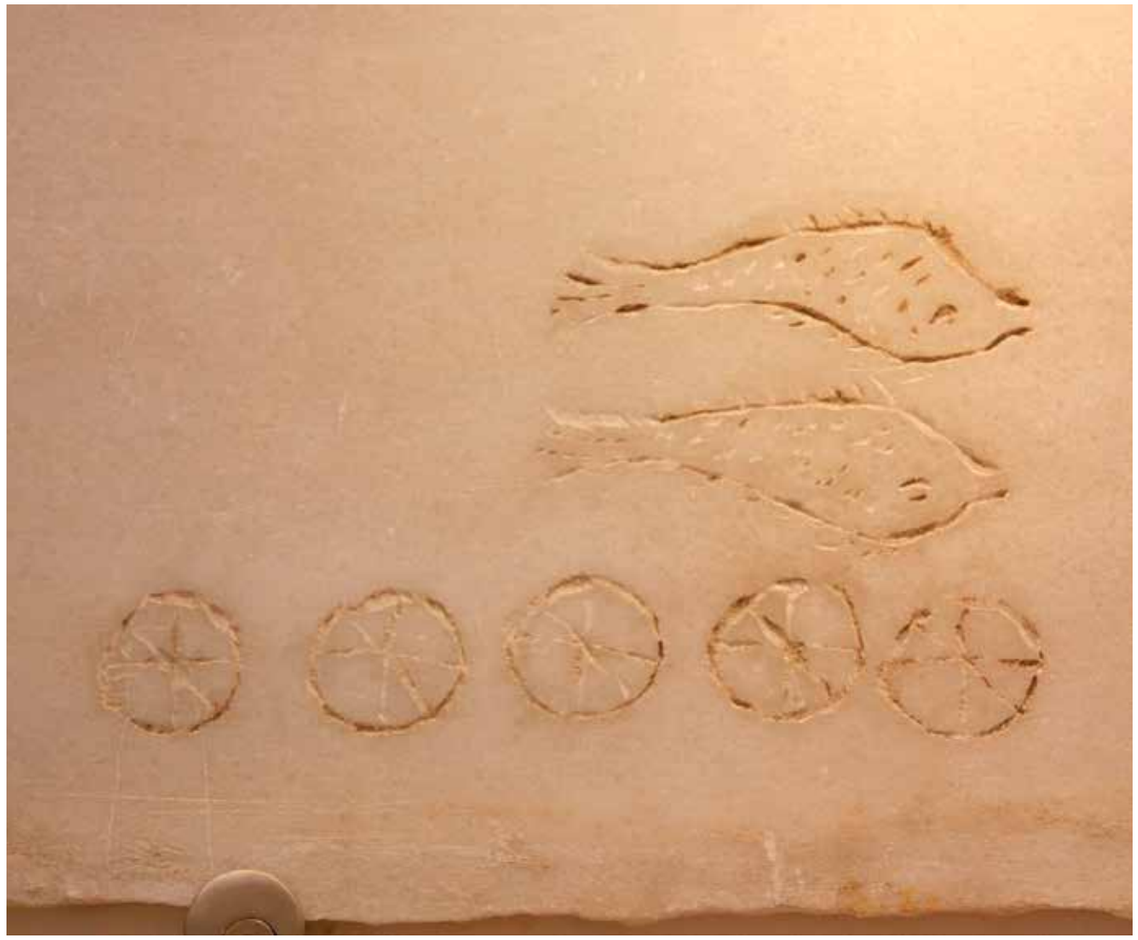
Let's go back to the culinary miracle. We do not know how this woman managed to cook ninety dishes of different colors, all with the same taste, to impart her moral lesson. Which spices were used and in what quantity? Which cooking method led her to this result?

The narration is silent on this secret, and there is no temptation to tire oneself in order to acquire the skill of preparing ninety dishes that all taste the same, but we are aware that what this skilled woman did was to set an example not always necessary for the cook in Islamic popular culture, which does not shy away from the pleasure of food and considers asceticism, when it reaches the point of harming the body, a sin.

Ezzat El-Qamhawy *is an Egyptian writer and journalist.*

The Meals We Speak: On Food, Language, and Translation

By Stefano Arduini



Let me start with a question. What does food have to do with language and translation? The most obvious answer is that there is a language of food and that this is one of the most delicate points of any translation, as experienced translators well know.

In this field, terminology and conceptual issues are truly complex, touching on what might be untranslatable from one culture to another. For example, we know that the terms with which different languages refer to animals can vary sharply depending on the point of view from which animals are viewed.

But this is not the topic of the present article. I don't intend to write about the words used to talk about food, or the language of food. I intend to write about food as a language and the different culinary traditions as languages with their lexicons, grammars, rhetoric and stylistics, which we must learn in order to know them.

Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Language of Cooking

It was Lévi-Strauss who argued that if there are no societies that don't have a language, there are no societies that don't have food.

From this statement, it can be deduced that, just as every language is an instrument of culture, so the way food is processed constitutes one of the elements that characterize a culture. Language and cuisine define the way human beings communicate.

In 'The Raw and the Cooked', Lévi-Strauss explored how the way certain foods are cooked builds a system of relations that gives food the real attributes of 'a sign' in the structuralist sense of a link between a concept and its representation. Animals in nature eat everything that their instinct deems edible, but for human beings, social conventions dictate what food is and what it is not, what kind of food to eat, and when to eat it.

For Lévi-Strauss, the relations that structure food and cooking are based on three premises:

Cooking is a language and as such it has a structure made up of binary oppositions.

That structure is formed of the culinary triangle: Raw/cooked/rotten — a triangle that implies a double opposition between nature/culture and elaborated/non-elaborated.

In practice, this abstract triangle is structured in different oppositional pairs, such as roast/boiled.

The category of raw forms the basis for two elementary levels: cooked food, which is the cultural transformation of raw food; and rotten food, which is the natural transformation of raw food. With respect to this basic triangle, there are some intermediate states, such as cooking associated with air, which leads to roasting or smoking, and the use of water for boiling.

From this point of view, boiled food is associated with domestic cooking, with the intimate sphere — identified with the idea of family cooking (in dishes such as stew) by women and mothers. Roasting, on the other hand, is identified with the cuisine of public celebrations that take place in the community sphere, in outdoor spaces, associated with the male world.

But in general, the hierarchical position of boiled-roasted food is linked to the principle of maximum-minimum cooking. The less the food is processed, the higher its social status. Roasted food is often more aristocratic than boiled food because its processing only involves fire, unlike boiled food, where both water and oil are used. Similarly, raw fish (sushi) is considered a food of great prestige.

Things become even more complicated if we add other categories of food, such as smoked, fried, dried, marinated, steamed, baked, or pressure-cooked. To these categories, different cooking times are added, resulting in innumerable combinations. All these elements contribute to the creation of a code that constitutes a sort of sequence lying at the basis of the definition of the processes by which cultural order and social hierarchy are generated:

Some foods are exclusively suitable for men, others for women; some are forbidden to children, others can only be eaten on public holidays, yet others are forbidden to members of different religious groups.

Roland Barthes: Food as Data

Even for Roland Barthes, food is not just something you eat:

'What is food? It is not just a collection of products in need of statistical or dietary study. It is also and at the same time a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of uses, situations, and behaviors... By buying food, consuming it, or having it consumed, the modern man does not handle an object in a purely transitive way; this food summarizes and transmits a situation, it constitutes information, it is significant; this means that food is not simply the index of a set of more or less conscious motivations, food is a true and proper sign, that is, the functional unit of a communication structure.'

Every country has its own types of food with its own preparations, which have an impact on its culture. Barthes emphasizes that food is a communication system whereby different kinds of bread, say, denote different situations. His example is that a normal loaf of bread can be eaten on a normal day, whereas sliced bread can be used for special occasions.

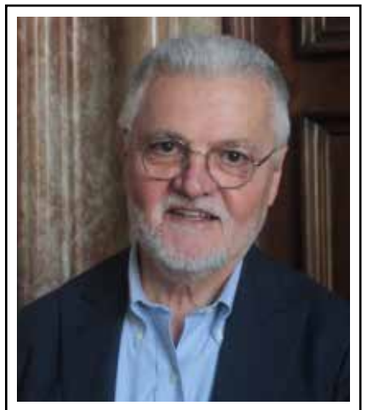
From this point of view, food has the same function as language because both build cultural identity.

However, the world's cuisines, although they respect local paradigms, tend to force 'natural constraints in the name of encounters and clashes, of conflicts and negotiations, of translations' among multiple culinary habits.

It is for this set of reasons that various dietary beliefs and practices concern religion. All over the world, Muslims fast during Ramadan, the month in which the Quran was given by God to the Prophet Muhammad. Orthodox and some Conservative Jews follow kosher dietary rules, established in the Torah, interpreted in the Talmud, and codified in the Shulchan Arukh.

Many followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism are vegetarians, partly because they believe in the doctrine of non-violence. Dietary practices vary widely even among those who practice the same faith. These variations may be due to national differences and the degree of orthodoxy or religious adherence of individuals or families. In this way, we can understand that food conveys people's religious feelings and contributes to building their identity.

As Gianfranco Marrone writes, culinary habits are not the mirror of defined identities, but the continuously changing results of translations between different culinary habits. And just as identity is always built in relation to otherness, so gastronomies have little to do with the characteristics of territories, but are created a posteriori, as a result of continuous hybridization and translation processes.



Stefano Arduini *is full professor of Linguistics at the Link Campus University in Rome. He is a board member of the Nida Institute in Philadelphia and co-director of the Nida School of Translation Studies.*

All the World in a Taste Bud: Food's Boundless Universe

By Maria Teresa Zanola

Food may provide us with nourishment, health, joy, and the shared pleasures of the table. But beyond all that, it can serve as a gateway to an individual's culture, identity, tradition, knowledge, and profession. We cannot dissociate food from all these values; our memory gathers so many daily or celebratory moments in which attention is turned to food as an element of identity, as a glue that binds the people gathered around it in a ritual that is part of our history.

At the same time, food — as we said — is work; the work of those who cultivate the land and follow the production and marketing process. It is the fruit of laborers, cooks, those who work to support a family, and the exploited or poorly paid. Sometimes it is even the byproduct of the unemployed or those with humble professions that no one wants nor thinks about when we buy our bread, fruits, and vegetables.

There is a universe around food, and we all take part in it in our daily pursuit to feed ourselves, feed those who may have difficulties procuring sustenance for themselves, or even when we abstain from eating for reasons of health, religion, or otherwise for stretches of time.

Since ancient times, food has been sought after and prepared as a support for the most diverse existential conditions, but its relevance has always been such as to also become an artistic object that inspired imagination and creativity; over the centuries, food — and the act of preparing it — has been painted, sculpted, narrated, represented, studied, and filmed.

It's enough to take note of the number of museum exhibitions that feature food as their main focus, not to mention fully-fledged museums that are entirely dedicated to a single dish. These museums reconstruct narrative and figurative paths, which allow us to follow the history and development of the most diverse recipes, how they're prepared, and their influence on traditions and cultures. Think of the role of cocoa and chocolate, or tea, coffee, potatoes and tomatoes — which have become a staple of many cuisines around the globe despite the fact that they originated in the Americas — or spices, to name a few.

Many artistic works have also helped ignite people's passions towards some of these foods. One could amass collections of paintings, prints, videos, novels, and short stories about these dishes; each and every one of which has an exciting linguistic, cultural, social, and economic story to be told.

Are We What We Eat?

Food Studies — understood as critical studies on food and its contexts in the fields of science, art, history, and society — have long been established to answer a number of key questions regarding the historical dynamics of food.

What is the impact of food on the environment? Has food contributed to acts of power or coercion among peoples? Why are some foods indexes of identity? Why have some foods globalized more than others?

These challenging questions require in-depth knowledge, and they are today the cornerstone of many international research projects. There have also been talks about foodscapes — urban food landscapes (commercial infrastructures and private and/or collective productive spaces) that affect the eating styles of individuals, their consumption, practices, and representations. Moreover, food landscapes have also been found to enhance the beauty of natural landscapes, be they cultivated or uncultivated, giving unexpected glimpses of extraordinary visual impact in our countryside.

Food is thus an element of wonder, and where wonder is stirred, there lives the desire for knowledge and the anxiety for freedom. Food brings us back to childhood memories, to the thoughts of people who live and have lived with us, to special meetings, to rebellions for imposed nourishment, and to the passion for coveted nourishment.

I am convinced that each of us has their own food-related stories, be it something that they loved, hated, dreamed of, desired, or rejected. Anyone could tell that story when they reflect on a lifetime of traditional dishes, the places and festivities they've been to, or even the special dishes they may have had while visiting a family that's not their own. I dare not imagine the set of paintings and panels that could be composed, and that would be perhaps the truest gateway to the knowledge of the other.

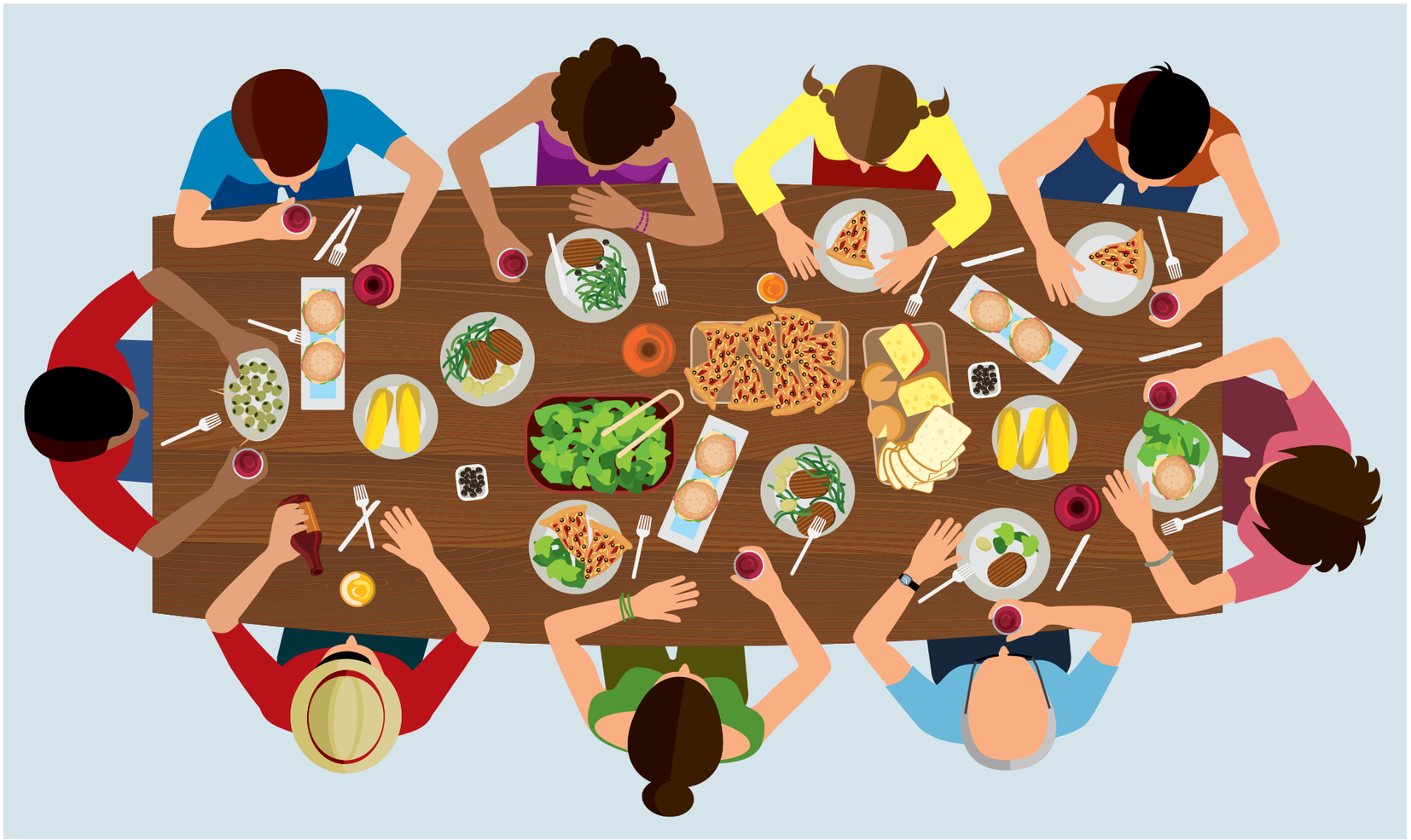
Talk, Live as You Eat

Language also plays a very important role in this gallery of wonders that is food. Language preserves every trace of the evolution of food with words that remain unchanged in different times and spaces. It also does so with less frequent, more specialized terms, which recall specificities of treatments and working methods that change over time with untranslatable words that constitute details of each linguistic and cultural tradition.

When learning a new language, words pertaining to that language's cuisine await us — both the most frequent ones and those that we do not initially learn but are still commonplace in that culture's day-to-day life. We do not immediately need to know how to say 'spoon' and 'teaspoon', 'fork' and 'dessert fork', 'knife' and 'dessert knife', or the distinct names of various pots and pans. And yet, we use them every day to cook all manner of dishes.

This is a treasure trove of a heritage that never ceases to fascinate and involve each of us in its inestimable wealth and the depth of the messages it sends. It is an invitation to observe how much food is part of our experiences. It is a discovery that pushes us to verify how food is a fundamental part of the structure of our lives and daily choices. It is a curiosity that guides us to reflect on the extent to which food is a vacation or routine, a factor of sustainability or pollution, or an element of pressure or freedom.

Food lives with us. Our food choices also determine the types of production our economies engage in, influencing the work of millions of people worldwide. Let us return to the importance that food has for work, for those who prepare it with maternal and paternal love for their children, and for those who reach unattainable peaks of skill, mastery, art, and dedication in their pursuit of the culinary arts.



Food is an empty plate that can be filled, that hopes to be filled, that awaits to be filled lest it remain desolately empty. We take for granted that plates welcome whatever is placed in them. But there are dishes that do not satisfy, that cannot satiate our hunger for nourishment and hope.

We must learn to respect our food and seek to understand it. Only in this way can a dish of one tradition serve as a gateway to the world of another.

Offering a traditional dessert to a guest says a lot more than we can imagine. It tells our story and expresses our humanity and desire to open ourselves to the other and welcome them into our lives.

Maria Teresa Zanola *is Professor of French Language and Translation at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and President of the European Language Council.*

A Golden Spice: The Saffron Road

Akrotiri (now called Santorini) was an ancient Bronze Age port city that was destroyed and buried by a volcano eruption in BC 1628. The ancient ruins of the city were discovered around 1860 by workers of the volcanic rock quarries for the Suez Canal, but archaeological excavations did not begin until a century later, bringing to light buildings with pictorial material.

The story of saffron is emblematic: a precious and refined food desired by many peoples. A food that is both local and global. As is the case with pepper, through the history of one single spice passes the history of humanity.

In a room of one of these buildings, two female figures are portrayed collecting a flower — the crocus or saffron. It seems that the frescoes represent a spring festival during which thanks were given for the gift of the plant with all its multiple pharmaceutical properties.

Assyrian botanical writings once attributed therapeutic properties to saffron; and now, it seems that saffron is starting to become more widely used in the treatment of depression, making it the spice of good humor!

From the Greco-Roman period to the Middle Ages, the saffron trade spread everywhere throughout the Mediterranean. It was produced in Morocco, bought by perfumers in Rosetta in Egypt and by doctors in Gaza, and used to dye fine fabrics in Tyre and Sidon. The trade was even highly regulated, with pirates and smugglers of the widely coveted spice sentenced with hefty fines and imprisonment.

From Persia to Spain, the saffron trade spanned centuries and fashions, arriving first in Central Europe, then in Britain. Eventually, Austrian, Cretan, French, Spanish, Sicilian, and Ottoman saffron varieties also became available. By the fifteenth century, the spice was used in more than seventy recipes as an ingredient for sweet and savory preparations.

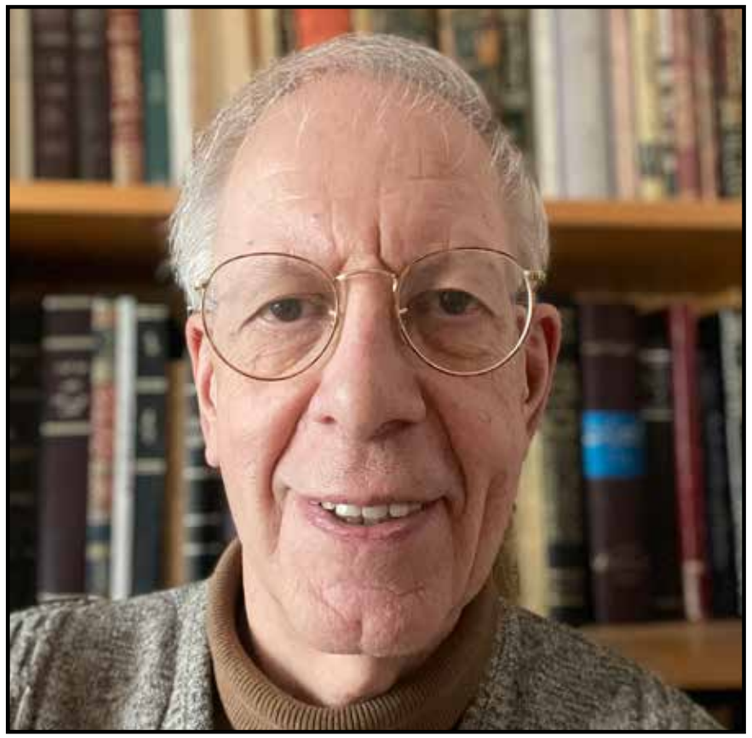
Precious, sought after, and desired, saffron is a local and global spice; a story of yesterday and all times. It seems impossible to reconstruct such a complex map and such a rich tapestry of events in just a few lines. And we have only briefly mentioned a few passages in the history of a single spice… Imagine how much could be written or told of every single dish that we enjoy!

Eat Your Words:

Geert Jan van Gelder on Arab Dish Discourse

By Fatena Alghorra

Food is always a great conversation starter with strangers. However, in this case, food will be the opportunity for starting a dialogue with the Dutch scholar Geert Jan van Gelder — Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford — who has always dealt with the history of Arab culture.



Jusur (J): *What prompted you to write a book on food and Arabic literature?*

Geert Jan van Gelder (VG): As has often happened in my academic career, I was inspired by others. In 1994, there was a one-day conference in the Netherlands of Dutch specialists in Middle Eastern studies on the theme of food and culinary cultures in the Middle East. I was asked to give a lecture and to contribute an article in Dutch.

I became interested, not so much in Middle Eastern food, but in how food and eating were represented in premodern Arabic literary texts. This resulted in a few scholarly articles and my book 'Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food' (2000).

It was published simultaneously in the US as 'God's Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature' because the publishers there did not like my original title. My interests are primarily literary. Literature may deal with almost every imaginable subject, including food, so I wrote about the theme of food when asked. It is, after all, a very interesting subject.

J: *Is it possible to gain insight into the history of Arab culture by studying the status of food in Arab literature?*

VG: Culinary traditions are an important part of culture in general. The term 'Arab culture' ('al-thaqafa al-arabiyya') is ambiguous. The Arabic word 'Arabi' may be translated into English with three adjectives, each having a different meaning: 'Arabian' (referring to geography), 'Arab' (referring to ethnicity or to modern politics when one speaks about Arab countries, even though not all inhabitants will identify themselves as Arabs), and 'Arabic' (referring to language and literature).

Which of these is meant when we discuss 'al-thaqafa al-arabiyya'? Is it about Arabs only, or also about everything written in Arabic? In pre- and early Islamic sources, one finds information about many Bedouin dishes. But already in those days, one sees the influence of Persian culture when 'faludhaj' is mentioned as a delicacy.

In the Abbasid period, this Persian impact on culinary matters becomes much stronger. I am unable to answer the question, for it would be better perhaps to speak of 'Middle Eastern culinary culture.'

This is also reflected in several important collections in Western languages about the topic, such as Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper's Culinary Culture of the Middle East (1994); Manuel Marín & David Waines' 'La Alimentación en las Culturas Islámicas' (1994); and Kirill Dmitriev, Julia Hauser, and Bilal Orfali's 'Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond' (2020).

J: *Some foods are mentioned in the Quran that are partly forbidden and partly lawful. Has religion had any tangible effects on the food*

culture documented in Arabic literature?

VG: The food prohibitions in the Quran certainly influenced the food habits of all Muslims. But the Quran is not a legal handbook, and it contains very few rules about different kinds of food. Far more important are the Prophet's sayings or Hadiths and the detailed discussions of jurisprudents or the 'fuqaha'.

There is always a gap between the strict rules of the Sharia and daily practice, but I find it striking, for instance, that the taboo on eating pork is virtually universal and fairly strictly observed among Muslims, whereas drinking wine, also explicitly forbidden in the Quran, was widely practiced, with wine being celebrated by many poets.

The 'khamriyya' or Bacchic poem is one of the major poetic genres in Arabic, whereas one does not find 'taamiyya' as a literary term, even though there are poems about food; but, as I wrote in 'Of Dishes and Discourse', 'Bacchic poetry [...] has always enjoyed a much higher status than poems on food.' Wine is considered more 'spiritual,' whereas the description of food and dishes is generally a low, earthy subject, more suitable for jesting, 'hazl', and 'fukaha' than for high-status poetry — when food is mentioned in the context of generosity and hospitality.

***J:** Food is integral to the culture of Arab society, there is almost no occasion where it is not present. A person's generosity or stinginess is usually measured by the number of people they feed. An example of generosity is Hatim Al-Ta'i. Is the primary linguistic concept of food limited only to these two ideas of generosity and avarice?*

VG: In pre- and early Islamic Arabic poems, the feeding of others is — together with bravery — one of the two main sources of glory and fame. Liberally giving food is the most common expression of generosity and nobility. See Chapter Two in my book 'Of Dishes and Discourse': 'Early Poetry: Feeding as Good Breeding'.

This old Bedouin ideal never disappeared and survived in urban Arabo-Islamic culture. Its opposite, miserliness or stinginess, called 'bukhl' or 'shuhh' in Arabic, is very often illustrated with examples involving food in countless poems and anecdotes.

One of the oldest and certainly one of the most entertaining sources is, of course, Al-Jahiz's book, 'The Misers' (or 'Al-Bukhala'). The pre-Islamic poet whom you mention, Hatim Al-Tai, has always been proverbial, not only in Arabic literature and lore but even in Persian. See for instance the famous 'Gulistan' (or 'The Rose Garden') by Sa'di, where he is mentioned several times. He is said to have slaughtered a herd of several hundred camels for a party of strangers, as a result of which he became a paragon, not of foolishness, but of honor and generosity. However, it is usually forgotten that the camels did not belong to him but to his father (or his grandfather according to some), who was not at all pleased.

***J:** There are many cultures that, through Islam, have mixed or interacted with Arab culture. What do you think of the influence that this integration into Islamic society has had on the culture of food in Arabic literature?*

VG: I have already mentioned the great impact of Persian culture in general and culinary culture in particular on Arabo-Islamic culture. This is noticeable, for instance, in the names of many dishes and foodstuffs that have a Persian origin such as 'faludhaj', 'bazmaward', 'judhabah', 'sikbaj', 'zirbaj', and 'khushkananaj', as they can be found in anecdotes and in the several medieval cookbooks.

These anecdotes and cookbooks, however — although they are part of Arab culture — are not representative of culinary practice in general because they strongly favor the higher classes and the courts of caliphs, viziers, governors, and the wealthy. I should add that Persian culture is not the only culture that mixed with Arab culture, for Arabs and the Arabic language also spread in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. And it would be surprising if the local food habits of Greeks, Copts, Berbers, Iberians, and others had not survived to some extent.

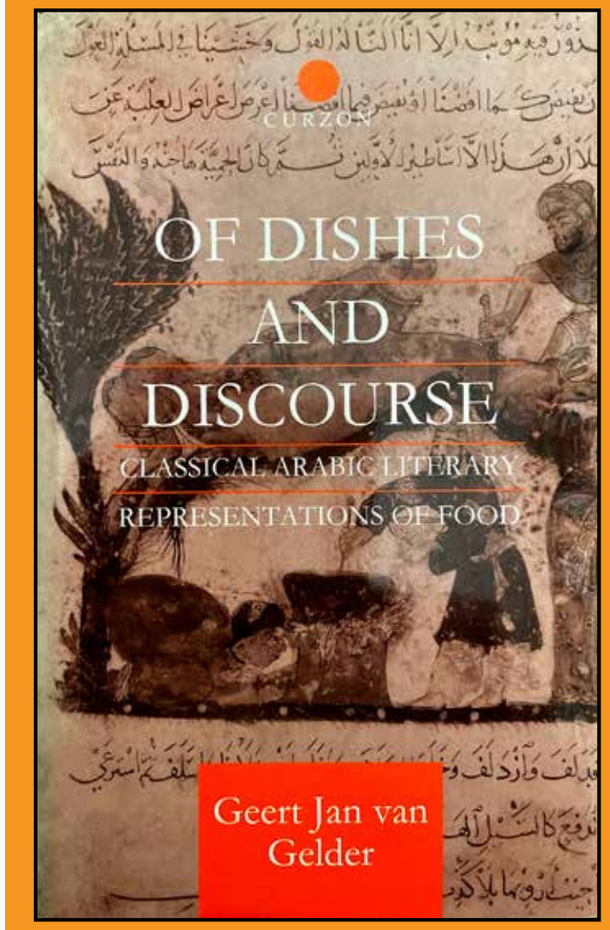
Just as literary genres and forms spread from the Arab West to the East (e.g. the 'muwashaha' and the 'zajal'), dishes also spread from the West to the East. Couscous, for instance, is found in 'Fudalat Al-Khuwan', a cookbook from the thirteenth century by the Andalusian Ibn Razin Al-Tujibi, with recipes from the Muslim West and Al-Andalus, but it is also mentioned as 'kuskusu' in a Syrian cookbook from the same period: 'Al-Wusla Ila l-Habib fi Wasf Al-Tayyibat wa-l-Tib', which was recently edited and translated by Charles Perry as 'Scents and Flavors'.

Muslim culture, in general, is of course much broader than the Arab world and Iran; modern Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia all have their own culinary cultures, but I am not competent to speak on these cultures or to determine to what extent they are influenced by Arab foodways.

***J:** Is it possible, through careful observation of the various eras of Arab literature, to identify the changes that have taken place in Arab society due to the multiplicity of cultures influencing it?*

VG: The answer to this question was already given, or at least implied, above. In terms of literary history (taking literature in the limited sense of belles-lettres) the most important watershed is not the coming of Islam in the seventh century, but the change from the Arab Kingdom of the Umayyads to the Islamic Empire of the Abbasids during the eighth century, when Arabic was adopted by many who were not ethnically Arab and who became leading figures in literary and political history. Clearly, the next major change took place with the growing influence of Western countries and the globalization of commerce.

Stirring the Arab Pot: On Medieval Cookbooks and Good Behavior



No one disagrees on the value and historicity of food culture or its presence in Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic era until the one following the advent of Islam and on its intertwining with the different cultures that entered it.

Therefore, it may be superfluous to say that the first books that specialized in culinary culture appeared in the Abbasid era. An example is Ibn Sayyar Al-Warraq's 'Kitab Al-Tabkh' — a cookbook published in 1000 AD that contains cooking recipes dating back to the previous two centuries. Or the Al-Baghdadi book that carries the same title, which was published in 1239 AD and includes nearly one hundred and sixty Arab recipes and the explanation of the arts of food with delightful poems and entertaining stories, responding to the taste of Arabs at that time.

The critical edition of Ibn Sayyar's recipe book of 1987 by the Finnish orientalist Kaj Öhrnberg, in collaboration with the Lebanese researcher Sahban Mroueh, contributed to drawing the attention of a number of Western orientalists who were fascinated by Arab culture and its heritage and were lured by the magic of the East and its myths to dive into the history of this region by studying manuscripts, scientific treatises, and literary works that form the basis for understanding of Islamic culture at the time.

Geert Jan van Gelder

Among these orientalists is the Dutch Geert Jan van Gelder — Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Oxford — with his book 'Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food'. The book, published in 2011, was followed by a series of academic and literary studies on the subject.

In his volume, composed of seven chapters, van Gelder explains the decision to take Al-Baghdadi's book as a reference. In fact, he opens the introduction of his volume with a sentence that also appears in the introduction of Al-Baghdadi's book, in which he speaks of the various types of pleasure divided into seven categories: Humor, food, drink, clothing, sex, perfumes, and sound.

Van Gelder added that 'food is the noblest and most important of all these,' comparing Al-Baghdadi's quotation with that of the Greek philosopher Hippocrates, who wrote that 'the main pleasures in this world are four: Food, drink, sex, and sound.'

However, according to van Gelder, the concept of sound in Al-Baghdadi is different from that of Hippocrates. By sound, Al-Baghdadi probably means music and singing, but since Arab culture is proud of its language and rhetoric, van Gelder believes that these two elements should also be included in the sound category.

The author reviews a series of studies and manuscripts that have dealt with food and literature from the perspective of morality, from which derives the definition of literature, concluding that the relationship between food, morals, and literature is clearly symbolized by the evident etymological link between 'adab', understood as literature, and 'adab' understood as good manners and etiquette.

The importance of food in Arabic and Islamic culture. This is how the Orientalist Scholar Geert Van Gelder has made a decisive contribution to academic and literary studies on the subject with his book 'Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations Of Food'

In the second chapter of the book, van Gelder links food to some ancient cardinal virtues of Bedouin culture, such as courage and generosity, arguing that for the Arabs — especially in pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry — these virtues associated with food were not so much a means to reach paradise. Rather, they were means to achieve honor and glory, both personal and tribal. This allowed the individual to obtain immortality in earthly life through poetry and stories.

Then, in the third chapter, van Gelder presents some Quranic verses, considered from a non-religious point of view as the first Islamic literary text, and shows how food in the Quran has a different value compared to the one it had in Bedouin culture, which considered the lavishness of food as a proof of generosity and good hospitality.

The meanings of these Quranic verses, on the other hand, are linked to the concepts of enjoyment and prohibition. 'This day are (all) good things made lawful for you. The food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them.' (Quran 5:5). It is a breakthrough of cognitive importance that can open the door for further study.

In the following three chapters, van Gelder continues the analysis of the relationship between food and some behaviors and moral notions of Arab-Islamic society in antiquity. In the sixth chapter, he discusses the relationship between food and sex, described as the 'two good things' by the Arabs, according to a view that regards food and sex as endless pleasures.

For example, there is the saying of the pre-Islamic poet Ta'abbata Sharran: 'I have never loved anything like these three things: Eating meat, riding flesh, and rubbing flesh against flesh.'

Or, according to a philosophical-theological vision in which the meaning of the 'two good things' distances itself from the original one to approach the concept used by Al-Ghazali in his 'The Reviving of Religious Sciences' in the chapter titled 'The Repression of the Two Appetites', which is based on the religious understanding that disapproves of greed for both food and sex.

Transcendent Nourishment: Sufi Cuisine in South Asia

By Haji Syed Salman Chishty

Serving food is connected to generosity — a virtue that is central to Islamic spiritual traditions. It is considered a quality of the soul which God gives to those he loves, those who are not attached to material wealth but use what they are given to please God and, thereby, make the world a better place. This doesn't mean that the attribute of generosity is not possessed by a person, but that it is God who bestows that possession of it upon them, because of his love for that person.

Throughout the Holy Quran and Hadith — a collection of the sayings, teachings, and noble actions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him — the followers of the Islamic creed and the Sufi practitioners are called to feed the hungry and help those in need, regardless of race, religion, or background, with an example from the Quran being:

The example of those who spend their wealth in the cause of God is that of a grain that sprouts into seven ears, each bearing one hundred grains. And God multiplies the reward to whomever he wills.' (Quran 2:261).

In terms of Hadith, one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad, Abdullah bin Amr, said: 'A man asked the Prophet, "What traits are best in Islam?" The Prophet said, "Feed the people and greet those whom you know and those whom you do not know."' (Bukhari).

Serving Creation like the Sun, the River, and the Earth

Sufis believe that everything we have is bestowed upon us by God and therefore nothing — not even our bodies — belongs to us, but to God. We are merely trustees of these bounties, and we are to use them in the best of ways, as God wills, to uplift the rest of his creation.

With the same noble intentions, the Chishty Sufi Order in the Indian subcontinent believes in practicing the spiritual traditions in the light of the sublime teachings of eleventh-century Sufi Grand Master Hazret Khawaja Moinudeen Hasan Chishty, popularly known as Khawaja Gharib Nawaz — Benefactor of the poor, downtrodden, and strangers, who have no one to tend to their immediate personal and social needs.

Nawaz established the principles of serving all with unconditional love. According to these principles, if one intends to get close to the divine creator, he must serve creation by developing three attributes of natural elements within himself: Sun-like Grace, River-like Generosity, and Earth-like Hospitality, as the Sun, River, and Earth never discriminate among whom they serve. The warmth of the Sun, the water of a river, and the hospitable nature of Earth are for all, irrespective of their race, religion, region, language, ethnicity, or any other background.

Sufi cuisine reflects the rich cultural heritage of India, where food is not just a means of sustenance but is also a way of expressing love, compassion, and gratitude towards all living beings.

The Langar (Sufi food distribution center) of Dargah Ajmer Sharif — the Sufi shrine located in Ajmer (Rajasthan, India) — is a sacred space of the Chishty Sufi community that provides free meals to all visitors regardless of their caste, religion, or socio-economic status.

It has been serving pure vegetarian meals with no onion and garlic to thousands of visitors twice a day for the last eight hundred years. The Langar's food is prepared by a team of volunteers who work tirelessly to ensure that the visitors are fed healthy and nutritious meals.

The Langar also provides a space for visitors to come together and share a meal, regardless of their background. This promotes unity and brotherhood among people of different faiths and helps to break down barriers. Visitors can take part in the Langar by volunteering to help with cooking, serving, or cleaning up.

The Langar of Ajmer Dargah Sharif is not just a community kitchen, but also a symbol of the Sufi tradition that emphasizes the importance of service to humanity. The concept of Langar is deeply rooted in the teachings of Chishty Sufism, which emphasizes that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the divine and that service to others is an essential part of spiritual growth.

Seekers and devotees of all faiths and religious backgrounds from different parts of India and the world come to the Dargah Ajmer Sharif to offer their prayers and seek blessings from the Sufi saint, and the Langar provides a platform for them to come together and share a meal as a human family.

Small Grains of Big Value

The Langar's food reflects the Chishty Sufi philosophy of simplicity, non-violence, and harmony with nature. One of the unique aspects of Chishty Sufi cuisine is the use of millet in their cooking — small, nutrient-rich grains grown in India and an essential part of the country's culinary heritage. Millet is gluten-free, rich in fiber, and contains essential nutrients such as iron, calcium, and potassium.

The Chishty Sufi tradition has long recognized the nutritional value of millet and has incorporated it into their daily cooking. Millet is used to make a variety of dishes, including roti (flatbread), tahiri (a rice and potato dish), and Langar thick soup (a sweet or at times salted porridge).

In recent years, thanks to our Indian prime minister's vision and policies, there has been a renewed interest in millet. When India's proposal at the UN General Assembly was approved, 2023 was declared the International Year of Millets.

Traditionally grown and consumed in many parts of Asia and Africa, millet is an environmentally sustainable crop that requires less water and fertilizer compared to mainstream cereal crops such as maize and wheat. Cultivating millet can also help to conserve biodiversity, as it is often grown in diverse cropping systems that include other produce, shrubs, and trees. Finally, consuming millet supports farmers, especially smallholders, who often face challenges in accessing markets and earning decent incomes.

However, over the past decades, the consumption and cultivation of millet declined due to various factors, such as urbanization, administrative negligence, and changing food preferences. Now, recognizing India's stance on the potential benefits of millet, many governments, NGOs, and research institutions are promoting its revival through various initiatives.

Additionally, chefs, food bloggers, and nutritionists are also promoting millet as a tasty and healthy food option through innovative recipes shared on social media. Overall, the revival of millet can have positive impacts on health, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic development.

Incorporating millet into the diet is a healthy and environmentally friendly choice, and Chishty Sufi Langar meals are just an example of how it can be enjoyed in delicious and creative ways.

In addition to the nutritional benefits, using millet in cooking also helps to preserve traditional food practices and cultural identity.

Sharing Food as Transcendence

The Chishty Sufi tradition emphasizes the importance of sharing food as a form of service and community building, and the use of millet in their cooking aligns with their values of simplicity, sustainability, and compassion towards all living beings. By incorporating millet into our diets, we not only support sustainable agriculture but also promote healthy living and the preservation of our cultural heritage.

In essence, Chishty Sufi meals are not just about the food, but about the values and traditions that they represent. It is a cultural and spiritual expression of the Chishty Sufi way of life, which emphasizes the pursuit of inner knowledge, self-realization, and a deeper connection with the divine.

Through the act of serving, Chishty Sufi Langar traditions seek to cultivate a sense of gratitude, humility, and awareness of one's blessings. Chishty Sufi masters encourage their disciples to be mindful of the food they consume, seeing it as a gift from God and an opportunity to experience divine bounty firsthand.

Haji Syed Salman Chishty *belongs to the Sunni Chishty Sufi Order. He is the founder and president of the Chishty-Ajmer Sharif Foundation (India).*

Interfaith Dialogue in the New G20 Formula

Starting off in Bali, Indonesia, Al-Issa announced the inauguration of a global initiative as part of the forthcoming G20 summit, which led to the setting up of the first R20 — a religious forum parallel to the G20.

The first initiative of its kind in the history of the major economic nations of the world, the R20 was founded by the MWL and the Nahdlatu Ulama organization of Indonesia. The initiative is supported by Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who championed the launch of the R20 to 'show religion as a source of global solutions.'

In his inaugural speech, the Indonesian president affirmed that 'unity in difference' is a principle of utmost importance. He also argued that the different religious leaderships have now become an essential part of national unity and government development programs, highlighting that 'collaboration at the grass-roots level between the faithful of different religions is a source of pride for Indonesia.' He then mentioned the strong need for collaboration between the world's religious leaderships to effectively deal with the current global issues.

In the opening speech of the event, Al-Issa stated that, in most cases, the roots of the clash of civilizations — today as in the past — are only apparently linked to religion, because, in reality, they are caused by people who do not follow the true teachings of religions. Al-Issa also reminded the attendees that authentic Islam rejects the clash of civilizations, as is clearly written in Muslim religious texts.

The secretary-general also said that wisdom and credibility must go beyond the discussion of theories and good intentions; they must be translated into concrete initiatives and results. In this regard, Al-Issa announced the inauguration of a forum to build bridges between the East and West in the name of peace.

This initiative intends to overcome the dispersive nature of the 'traditional dialogues' of past decades, which moved from one place to another without fulfilling common objectives, with Al-Issa noting that this forum foresees the implementation of sustainable scientific programs that will focus on youths, family, and education, and will empower the role of the most influential religious platforms.

Furthermore, he explained the role the faithful of various religions must play in the affirmation of peace and the prevention of conflicts. 'The problem is not in the origin of religion, but in its understanding. Therefore, religious leaders, in solidarity with each other, must spread religious ideas that call for peace and condemn religious ideas that are misguided and dangerous,' Al-Issa said.

For his part, Director-General of the Indonesian Council of Ulema Sheikh Miftah Al-Akhyar stressed the urgent need for a summit of this kind, saying that the forum will make the world hear the influential voice of religion.

Addressing the audience at the summit, he added that 'the Nahdlatu Ulama organization and the MWL have great expectations from you all, religious leaders of the world, to present religious values as a solution to world conflicts and as a spiritual basis for a global civilization founded on the respect of human rights and the dignity of all.'

Religion's Answer to the G20: Bernhard Scholz on the R20

By Elisa Ferrero

Last November, shortly before the leaders of the G20 — the world's twenty richest countries — met in Bali, Indonesia, a parallel forum of religious leaders dubbed the R20 discussed issues of common interest. The two conversations — economic and religious — overlapped. We often see such meetings coinciding with major strategic and political-economic gatherings that seek to bring religious issues to the tables of the world's most powerful leaders.

Jusur (J): *What was the deepest impression that the R20 Summit in Bali left on you?*

Bernhard Scholz (BS): It was a great surprise to see so many representatives of almost all religions united in the certainty that such a dialogue is crucial for creating a better future. This certainty should not be taken for granted, because it is easy to reduce interreligious dialogue to something formal or marginal.

In Bali, on the other hand, there was an atmosphere of shared responsibility that did not want to homologate diversity to a common 'religious amalgam' but really wanted — in full respect of diversity — to open the space for dialogue not as a goal but as a means of being aware of the historical challenges we are going through. There was no self-referentiality or self-satisfaction, but a strong, courageous, and responsible involvement.

In this sense, the inaugural speech by the Secretary-General of the Muslim World League, Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, was decisive, for he gave a strong, constructive, and I would even say creative direction. It was an invitation to discover all the generative positivity present in our religions, which then shaped, in some way, the many dialogues of the R20. This sense of responsibility was also expressed by Pope Francis in his message.

J: *Were there any new features of this event that struck you, compared to other meetings of this kind?*

BS: It was interesting to observe the sincerity with which the participants expressed their points of view. Without omitting the differences and possible problems, they have tried to follow the intuition of mutual enrichment and open dialogue. This sincerity is a sign of maturity in a dialogue that does not have to hide anything but can face various challenges on the basis of a stable and well-founded relationship.

We are experiencing a dramatic moment in the history of humanity, not only due to the growing conflicts — including military ones — but also due to great ethical and cultural problems. In this sense, all religions are faced with new questions and problems ranging from ecology to family life.

Some of these questions were discussed in Bali, without claiming to have the solution in one's pocket, but in the conviction that dialogue within religions and between religions is decisive for being able to find truly human solutions and therefore also socially and ecologically sustainable solutions.

J: *In your opinion, what is the point of linking the dimension of a religious and spiritual summit like the R20 to the political-economic dimension of a summit like the G20?*

BS: The G20 is a commendable attempt to overcome antagonisms and find agreements capable of ensuring peace at the political and economic level, reducing poverty and inequalities, and maintaining constructive relations between nations.

On the other hand, the R20 is an opportunity to root dialogue at a deeper level and to share religiosity as a factor capable of uniting people, communities, and nations even in times of conflict and tension. In this sense, the religious and spiritual dimension must not allow itself to be exploited by politics but must become — through its own authentic and farsighted initiative — an instrument of peace, encounter, and dialogue for the good of all.

The R20 must not take place as a function of the G20 but give — on the occasion of the G20 — a voice and recognition to the religious dimension as an example of living together and of service to the common good. I would like to add that for this very reason, the defense of religious freedom and the construction of the common good are intrinsically linked.

J: *What use can a summit of religious leaders like that of the R20 have for their respective religious communities and for every single believer?*

BS: Surely, for communities and the faithful, it is an invitation to look at other religions with sympathy and to overcome prejudices and possible adversities. I hope that for some people, these meetings will become an opportunity to learn more about the history, life, and main characteristics of other religions.

For this reason, it also seems to me very important that the individual leaders inform their members of these meetings in the most appropriate manner. It is crucial that everyone is fully aware that the differences between one's condition and the beliefs of others are not an impediment to encounters but are, on the contrary, a decisive reason for them.

The Last Jewish Thinker, Edward Said: 'All Your Jewish Intellectuals Are Just Suburban Squires.'

By Subhi Hadidi

Thanks to Erich Auerbach's studies on 'realism in literature' in his fundamental work, Mimesis, Said developed his own original vision of literature: a vision based on the Jewish tradition that combines text analysis, the centrality of the Book and the experience of exile and diaspora.

In an interview with the Israeli newspaper 'Haaretz' conducted by Ari Shavit on August 18th, 2000, Edward Said declared, 'I believe that most political and intellectual disasters were caused by reductionist movements that tried to simplify and purify. Therefore, we had to erect the tent, the kibbutz, or the army, and start from scratch. I don't believe in all of this. And I wouldn't want it for myself, even if I were a Jew. I would fight it. And it wouldn't last. Take it from me, Ari, I'm older than you. Take it from me. It wouldn't even be remembered.'

Here Shavit takes the initiative to say, 'You look very Jewish.' Said replies with a slashing sentence, 'Of course. I am the last Jewish thinker. You don't know anyone else. All your Jewish intellectuals are just suburban squires, from Amos Oz to all those in America. And that's why I'm the last. I am the only true follower of Adorno. And let me put it this way: I am Palestinian-Jewish.'

It was in this dramatic manner that Said's statement on his relationship with Jewish philosophers, thinkers, and historians culminated; but let me first clarify what is meant by the terms 'thinker-philosopher' and 'Jew', in the very specific case of Said's legacy.

Women and men of the caliber of Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Bernard Lewis, Judith Butler, and Michael Walzer are the models that inspired Said as a 'thinker-philosopher' who, incidentally, is also a literary theorist, a critic, an orientalist, and a historian.

As for 'Jew', it is someone who was born into the Jewish religion, but not only that. He is also someone whose philosophy, whose thought, and whose literary criticism enclose, in their heart, some elements of Jewishness, such as the relationship with the text, the Book, and exile.

Said was always interested in the idea of politics as a matter of conflicting narratives that involve the attempt by each movement to legitimize its image before the world through telling a story about its origins. For him the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a case in point. He repeatedly observed how addressing the Palestinian question in the international mass media necessarily implied resuming the narrative of the story from the beginning, insisting that there really was a story.

It became his distinctive metaphor for the direct link between good and bad uses of language and political agendas. He suggested that an outdated (and mourned) European humanist tendency — represented by Auerbach or Adorno — had been replaced by a combination of cultural nationalism on the one hand and increasingly mystifying and formalist academic-specialist tendencies on the other.

Said contrasted this attitude with the more attractive and livelier environment he found among historians, from whom he drew much of his intellectual inspiration in more recent years. In fact, he insisted on saying this of his work: 'I can't give shape to anything if I don't base myself on history. I have always said that the study of literature is fundamentally a historical discipline.'

For reasons of space, let us stick with only three authoritative figures whom Said has confronted, whether to agree or disagree with them.

The Auerbach Connection

With the rise of Nazism, the German Jewish philologist, critic, and comparative literature scholar Erich Auerbach (1892 - 1957) was forced to leave Germany and take refuge in Istanbul, Turkey. He would exert a great influence on Said's thinking due to the similarity of their fates of uprooting, exile, and secular criticism.

Said was influenced by Auerbach with regard to the meaning of exile, understood by the German philologist in his retreat in Turkey during World War II as a sublimation of national and interregional borders. The concept of exile is linked to the existence of a place of origin, to love and attachment to the homeland; but what is real, in every condition of exile, is not so much the loss of the homeland or the love for the homeland, as the fact that the loss is an integral part of the very existence of the homeland and of the love for the homeland.

Auerbach's influence on Said is also manifest in the concept of culture, as explained in 'Mimesis', one of the most influential and original works of literary criticism. The studies behind this work start from a central principle, summarized in the subtitle of the book: 'The Representation of Reality in Western Literature' — in authors such as Homer, Tacitus, Dante, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Saint-Simon, Schiller, Émile Zola, Marcel Proust, and more.

Note that the background to Auerbach's book — which must always be considered according to Said — is that he wrote it in Istanbul, as a Jewish refugee in Turkey, fleeing Nazi violence of Europe, but also as a German specialized in classical European literature.

This allowed Said to explore the idea of a place parallel to the nation, as opposed to exile which leads to estrangement, but from the point of view of the use of the term 'culture' (particularly in the chapters of that book), which is not only something to belong to but also to own. In the process of this act of appropriation, culture draws conceptual boundaries whether within or outside itself.

Adorno's Alternative

Theodor Adorno is the German Jewish philosopher, sociologist, and music theorist who in 1928 joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which would develop a series of critical studies on contemporary culture and society under a clear Marxist influence.

Said details Adorno's cultural views and refutes most of them in detail. Adorno's pessimistic analyses of the contemporary cultural scene are based on ideas and postulates that are totally different from those of Said due to the temporal distance between the two and the former's Western as opposed to the latter's non-Western background.

Exile is not a privileged place that allows the individual to reflect on themself, but rather a substitute for the various powerful institutions that dominate much of contemporary life. If the exile decides not to engage in profound criticism, limiting themself to licking their wounds on the margins of life, it becomes their duty to develop a profound sense of self, as Adorno did in his important work 'Minima Moralia', written in exile and subtitled 'Reflections from Damaged Life'.

Adorno thought that life was compressed into 'prefabricated homelands,' that issues and problems were commodified, and that the moral imperative demanded that we should not feel settled anywhere. Such is the intellectual task of the exile.

Grappling with Bernard Lewis

Said's most significant disagreement was with Bernard Lewis, the British-American historian who can properly be dubbed the 'patriarch of Orientalism', given his extensive writings on Islam and the Orient, his polemics against Islam, and his warning against the multiplication of Muslims in Europe, as well as his close working relationship with the Pentagon as an adviser on the invasion of Iraq and his blind alignment with the Israeli state.

In a long article titled 'The Question of Orientalism,' published in 1982, which can be considered a first response to Said's book, 'Orientalism', Lewis comes to the abrupt conclusion that it was the orientalists themselves who voluntarily abandoned the adjective that describes them (on the occasion of the last conference titled Orientalism in Paris in 1973), stating that 'the term orientalism is now hopelessly polluted,' and that 'the term has lost its value and has, in fact, been discarded by the same people who once used to bear it.'

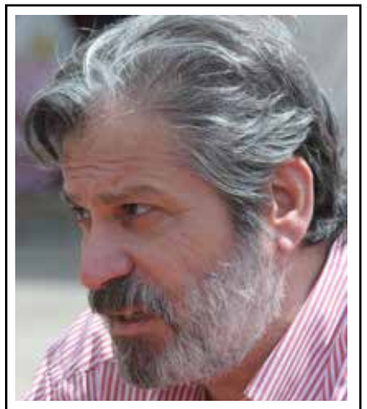
In part, according to Lewis, this is due to some Arabs belonging to Christian minorities living in Europe or the United States, such as Anwar Abdel-Malik and Edward Said. Lewis regarded the latter as the main representative of the anti-orientalist tendency. Therefore, he devoted three-quarters of his article to responding to Said's book.

Subsequently, Lewis would enter heated controversy, essentially with Said, then with many other researchers of the caliber of the French orientalist Oleg Grabar, as he repeatedly admitted the existence of a close relationship between orientalism and imperialism, believing that this situation was perfectly natural in every science and discipline.

Said's confrontation with these and other Jewish philosophers and historians was historically marked by two elements, at first sight contradictory, but in the end, dialectically complementary. The first is the element of imitation, admiration, or emulation, as in the case of Auerbach and Adorno. The second is the element of aversion, opposition, or intense criticism, as in the case of Sartre, Lewis, and others.

However, this confrontation took place in contexts that reflected many of the practical meanings of the concept of a 'Jewish Palestinian,' in the provocative and polemical sense used by Said in the 'Haaretz' interview, and which implies, according to a drastic point of view, that the historical privilege Jewish thinkers have always attributed only and exclusively to the Jewish people and to Judaism — that is, exile, loss, the state of refugees, and displaced persons — is today the privilege of the Palestinian people.

Not to be lost on us is the blatant irony that it is precisely those who have always monopolized this privilege who are most responsible for the ongoing historical upheaval.



Subhi Hadidi *is a Syrian literary critic, columnist, and translator. He lives in Paris, France. He recently wrote a book about Edward Said.*

Messi's Trophy: The 2022 World Cup in Qatar

By Amr Khafagy

At first glance, if we had to name the most memorable thing about the 2022 World Cup, it would be Lionel Messi. That small man finally embraced the cup he's coveted his entire life, and fulfilled the wishes of millions, first and foremost of which were the people of his country, Argentina.

However, they were not the only ones supporting this great player, because in the four corners of the earth, millions of young people cheered for him in his last battle to win the cup; the one with which he hoped to mark the end of his career and join the other two legends — Pelé and Maradona.

Millions of young people experienced the victory with him, as if they were him, because Messi wasn't simply an Argentinian in this championship; he overcame the borders of his country and nationality and went straight to the hearts of all nationalities, from East to West and North to South. He became a homeland for the hearts of millions of fans all over the world.

When we examine the vicissitudes of this championship, we discover that Lionel Messi was not the absolute champion of headlines. Although his name dominated the media, something unprecedented happened in this championship; the game of football itself (and especially football fans) stood out as the strongest and most important media headline.

In previous editions of the FIFA World Cup, the biggest media headlines either praised the host country, winning team, or emerging football stars. Or they celebrated the huge economic success, the historic number of viewers, or the live broadcasts of the matches, which have particularly increased thanks to the recent technological innovations.

This World Cup, however, has had even more obvious inputs; football sought a new meaning since the logic of its institutions has consumed its prime purpose.

Beyond Commodification and Corruption

The cruelty of commercial practices has degraded the spirit of football by commodifying everything — the players, the court, the goals, the injuries, the healthcare facilities, and the wars of sports drinks and sportswear. Even fans are sometimes turned into products displayed in the windows of FIFA and its agencies.

Let alone the aberrant behavior of some football managers who sully the purity of football — a sport that seeks to bring peace and harmony to all the peoples of the world. While it is true that most of these managers have been arrested, football still suffers from their crimes, and some of its more recent meanings have been left behind that astonishing modernity created by generations and generations of young people who rebelled against their predecessors and never stopped moving forward and striving, truly, for that shared feeling of brotherhood in achieving goals for the entirety of humanity, all through their favorite sport.

Football remains trapped in the corruption of the winners, those who aim only for commercial gains, and those who aim only for material gains. No one adds any real value to the game of football, not even at the lowest levels, which annihilates the efforts of all those who have done the impossible for the pleasure and glory of the game.

The fans, however, reject anything that undermines the nature of the sport they love so madly. Because of this mad love, they refuse to stay behind, and they move forward together toward the globalizing modernity of cheering — an act done solely by common people far away from official leaders.

Football Replaces War

At the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, with Messi and his ultimate aspiration, football established a powerful dialogue between loyal fans

that were born in the era of the globalization of football; a fake globalization based on commercial interests, devoid of any civilized meaning, unable of expressing the nobility of the game of football and its ongoing quest for peace.

Indeed, football is the noble fruit of the sports created on Mount Olympus to supplant war and killing. An exclusive virtue of humanity, sports have always kept this raison d'être throughout history, and whenever it has deviated, there have always been people who brought it back on its primary track, like sports leaders, determined players, and exceptional politicians who have understood the price of that deviation.

Football fans are a new interpretation of globalization: they love the interaction of cultures, they transcend the language barrier and the contradiction of customs and traditions, establishing a popular globalization

They proposed individual solutions — as is the case with many human causes — but the current generation, which finds itself amid this hateful globalization of football, is not waiting for a great leader nor a player of rare talent or a politician who is particularly committed to achieving peace.

Football fans have gone forward on their own, through an almost invisible dialogue, far from any kind of elite, and they have established an implicit agreement on the new meaning of the globalization of football.

Football is the true human face of globalization

The Globalization that Football Fans Love

The fans love the melting pot of different nationalities in a single team in southern England, Southampton, or northern Italy, Torino, or in the Catalan region of Spain (Barcelona) in local, international, and intercontinental matches at times.

They love the interaction between cultures, not letting skin color, language, culture or otherwise get in the way of their enjoyment of the game. While respecting everything, football fans established a positive globalization that is recognized everywhere by crowds of fans. And those among them who have abandoned this approach are a minority, because any player from any country, speaking any language, having any skin color, can lead their city to victory and become one of them just because he wears the jersey of that team.

Everyone went to Doha with this intellectual background, with all the cultures that football encompasses in this Winter World Cup with a clear Arab-Islamic identity in a small and pretty city, with the stadiums adjacent to one another and the fans together.

Those who stayed outside the stadiums cheered with those who sat inside in the always fully booked stands, and those tiny distances between people made every person feel like they were one united mass.

One of the characteristics that contributed to the cultural diversity of this World Cup is that Doha is a cosmopolitan city with thousands of Africans, Asians, and Arabs from various countries who were leading the crowds of fans and, of course, interacted with other European fans, thanks also to the proximity of the stadiums and the fan zones.

There was interaction that went beyond the limits of the stadiums and became part of the daily life, even in the restaurants of Doha, which served food from all over the world during those days. Everyone found what they were looking for, and everyone got to sample the cuisine of other cultures.

In a short time, dialogue was established between football fans, linked by the spirit of the game that overcomes every difference of nationality and grows even between fans of different teams. The development of media outlets, especially social media platforms, has contributed to nurture this dialogue.

The filming of the events of the World Cup skillfully connected everything that happened inside the stadiums with everything that was happening in the stands and outside the stadiums, thus giving us memories of stories related to football and stories that have less to do with it.

We watched true and sincere stories of dialogue between people from all over the world, and everyone could relate to them both locally and internationally. For example, the success story of the Moroccan national team has prompted all Arab countries to show their support for this country in a way that has never happened before.

This reflects the standard and expected unity of Arab peoples, but the involvement of non-Arab peoples in cheering the success of the 'Lions of the Atlantic' was truly astounding. The Moroccan success created a new hope among smaller football teams; a hope that one day even small teams can achieve great results.

Another unprecedented fact was the solidarity shown by so many countries for the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian flag was seen flying during most matches, and it was not only Arabs and Muslims who waved it, but it was everyone who believes in that cause.

In Doha, the globalization of football took on some truly benign attributes; the kind of attributes that fans want in their game of football. Qatar gave football a new meaning to strive to.

Messi and the Multiethnic Dream

Messi remains the absolute icon of this league, but it must be added that the Argentinian player has proven global fans' love for beauty; the beauty of talent, of the unique and mind-blowing skills of a player who has been a staple of the creative identity of football in the modern era.

Whether you look at him as a player or the captain of his country's national team, when this young Argentinian wished to take away the precious cup before leaving international stadiums for good, the masses of fans united in a global call to cheer for him, and they shouted together from all over the world: 'Messi!'

From the streets of Buenos Aires to the stadiums of Doha, from the cafes of Cairo to those of Nairobi and Khartoum, to the squares of Madrid, Paris, Riyadh, and Tokyo, everyone cheered for the extraordinarily talented player who captained a team that, according to experts, only had ordinary skills.

Messi fulfilled a dream that was not just his own, but it was shared by all fans; a multi-ethnic and multinational dream in the healthy sense of the word — the dream of the victory of beauty, which stands on the side of talent and restores the lost rights of people, violated by the ferocity of the ugliness of a globalization that only wants to sabotage the joys of the oppressed.

We saw football in Doha in one of its most beautiful new manifestations, in a joy that flooded the world, and in a dialogue that started in Doha in 2022 and will continue in America, Canada, and Mexico in 2026.

Amr Khafagy *is an Egyptian journalist, founder of several Arab newspapers and satellite TV channels.*

The Stones of Paradise: Women Saved by Faith

By Davide Perillo

Agnes Achan Aida has a deep look and a voice so low that sometimes you can hardly hear it. It is a legacy of the disease that she has been carrying with her since the three years she spent in the bush.

It was 1997 when the rebels kidnapped her from her village in northern Uganda. Agnes suffered all kinds of violence and was forced to use violence herself in order not to be killed. When she managed to escape and return home, her husband did not want her anymore. 'You are one of them now; go away.'

This is how she arrived in Kampala, the capital of Uganda; alone, sick, and full of plague. She was living in a shack left by her aunt in the slum of Naguru. 'They brought me food and water once a day. Sometimes I couldn't even move to get them. I had no hope. I was just waiting for death,' she once said.

Now she's amid about fifty women, laughing and singing under the roof of the Meeting Point. Next to her is Ketty, who has a story identical to hers: the rebels, violence, AIDS. And Teddy and Lilian and so many others with the same scars in their souls. Yet they dance and joke with each other while they sing the song with which they welcome the guests: 'Now I'm free.'

At least half of them have HIV. Many live by breaking stones in a quarry; ten hours of work for a couple of dollars a day. Others sell mangoes by the roadside or homemade necklaces with colored papier-mâché. Living the poor life in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Kampala. But the more you look at them, the more you realize that there is only one adjective to describe them: Happy. Why? How can it be?

Faith Weaves Stories, Stories Change the World

It is from this question that the book Your Names Are Written in the Heavens (published in Italy by Rizzoli and in Portugal by Paulinas) was born. It is the story of a journey to Uganda, in the world of these women, and of the person who has allowed them to find hope — Rose Busingye.

A fifty-four-year-old nurse specialized in infectious diseases, Busingye is the President of Meeting Point International — an association that helps more than 5,000 people that also gave birth to two schools, a training center for teachers, and a shelter for abandoned children. It is an integrated network based on education and solidarity but centered on another, deeper factor — Faith.

Looking at these women, one realizes in an impressive way how precious religiosity is, not only for one person but for society in giving a more human form to the world.

Busingye understood it little by little. She grew up in a Catholic family who immigrated from Rwanda. 'But for me, God was

something distant, reserved for the pure,' she tells. 'As a child, I saw my mother praying, and I thought: 'She is exaggerating.''

She began to change her perspective when she met an Italian missionary, Father Pietro Tiboni. After dealing with him and a group of boys who lived the experience of Communion and Liberation (CL) — a Catholic movement born in Italy in 1954 — Rose realized that God was not an abstract idea; that faith allowed you to treat everything differently, even forgive the enemies who killed your sister.

Rose was only sixteen when it happened, but in a letter to her friends, she recounted what she had told her mother: 'Why don't you start loving right away? It is God who does justice; you must forgive and pray.'

Her religious feelings further deepened when she met Father Luigi Giussani — the Founder of CL. Thanks to him, she realized that God had something to do with her flesh, her nothingness. She says today: 'Many others had told me about Jesus. But not in that way.'

The meeting with Father Giussani gave birth to everything: a personal vocation, entering the Memores Domini — a group of lay people who continue to stay in the world doing very normal jobs but do not marry and dedicate themselves totally to the Lord — and a professional vocation. She decided to be a nurse to help the victims of war. But when she returned to Uganda, after two years spent in Italy, a new threat had emerged — AIDS.

Rose was one of the first to treat the sick. She went looking for them in the slums, one by one. She took care of them, along with CL's friends. Around her, in a short time, a reality was born that helped dozens of people. A small oasis in the middle of an expansive drama. But that was not enough. After a while, she noticed something unexpected.

'I would take the medicines to the sick, and the next day, I would come back and find them in the garbage,' she says. It was like they weren't interested in living anymore. 'Or the children: I did everything to pay for their school fees, and they wouldn't go.' She felt she was in trouble. She wanted to run away. And then came a phone call from Father Giussani, who asked her to return to Italy.

Rose stayed there for six months. Father Giussani, who at the time was already old and sick, did not explain to her how to solve her problems. He just stayed with her. As soon as he could, he went to see her. They met for lunch and took a walk in which he told her about himself, his experience, and friends.

By living, he communicated to her the beauty of faith, and she was impressed. 'I saw how he spoke, how he tasted his food, how intensely he loved everything, and I wanted it for myself. I looked at him, and I wondered: imagine God. If a man can live and love like this, imagine how God loves.'

In those six months, Rose discovered the most important thing: 'My worth. I am nothing, we are nothing. But we are loved and wanted by God. That is why we have infinite value... We are greater than our problems, limitations, or incapacity.'

Embracing the Whole World

When she returned to Uganda, this 'value,' for her was no longer a word; it was flesh. It was a lived experience and, therefore, witnessed through her own life. 'The things I said to the sick were not very different than before.' She says, 'Even before then, I was talking about courage. But they were explanations. They weren't mine until the end.'

After that, around her, little by little, everything started up again. Women started caring for themselves again because through her look and embrace, they discovered that they too had value. And they started looking out for each other in the same way that she did.

Pretty soon, English courses, clinics, and savings groups were established, and precious moments in which she finds herself sharing experiences, talking about life, singing, and dancing to welcome newcomers were born.

She also widened her gaze on the world. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, the women told Rose they wanted to help Americans. 'Their hearts are like ours; they are part of us.' They put aside a portion of the money they earned by breaking the stones and after two months they delivered an envelope with a thousand dollars to the US ambassador, who was incredulous. But the same scene was repeated a few years later, when the earthquake in L'Aquila, Italy, took place. Or a few months ago, for the people of Ukraine.

One day, Rose came up with an idea: 'Let's make a hospital, so we can better treat you and your relatives.' The women looked at each other and said, 'No. We don't want a hospital, we need a school. Because we need our children to be educated as you are educating us: to discover their value.'

The first bags of cement were bought by them, with the money from the necklaces. Now there are two beautiful schools attended by nine hundred students. During the pandemic, when all schools in Uganda were closed for almost two years, teachers rode around to visit pupils in their shacks, which is something that was unthinkable everywhere but Uganda.

Here, around Rose and the Meeting Point, real relationships were born. There is something that unites, stronger than the distinctions between clans or tribes. It is even more powerful than the differences between religions.

Many of Rose's women are Muslim. 'When I got here, I had no hope,' said Hanifa Namwesezi. 'I hated myself and even my children.' Then, six years ago, she met Rose and her friends.

'There were people who said to me, 'Do not go with them, you are of another religion, they will not welcome you.' Instead, I only found people who encouraged me. My life has changed, and not for the money, but for the love they showed me.'

Today she works at the Meeting Point and attends the meetings of those Christian friends, 'Maybe I understand little, just a word, but that word is what I need to live.' Because happiness, she explains, 'does not depend on what you have, but on knowing who you are. That's the biggest thing I've learned here.'

Thus, at the end of the journey into Rose's world, among the many things one has learned about man and God, about development (what is the point of funding and aid projects if they do not educate people?), and about the irresistible force that human beings have when they discover their value; a sentence heard years ago also comes to mind, said by the late Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran — a passionate supporter of dialogue between men of faith: 'Religions are not the problem. They are part of the solution.'

In Kampala, this is a reality. And it can be seen.

Davide Perillo *is an Italian journalist and writer.*

Spontaneously Ecumenical: Charles Taylor on Involuntary Solidarity

By Pia De Simone

Charles Taylor works on the characteristics of modernity in their complex relations, advancing a non-reductive understanding of the reasons behind changes that have taken place in religious practices. One of the most insightful and influential contemporary thinkers, he is a Professor Emeritus at McGill University in Montreal. He is the author of many books, including 'Sources of the Self', 'The Ethics of Authenticity', and 'A Secular Age'.

Taylor has received many honors: the Templeton Prize (2007) for 'progress toward research about spiritual realities,' the Berggruen Prize (2016) for 'intellectually profound ideas that are able to inform practical and public life,' and the Ratzinger Prize (2019) for work that 'allows us to deal with Western secularization in a way that is neither superficial nor given to fatalistic discouragement.'

***Jusur (J)**: You have repeatedly supported the idea of human life as a journey. How does this image help us understand our times?*

Charles Taylor (CT): People are on a journey, on a spiritual journey. Seeing myself in these terms helps me to see a lot of other people in terms of journeys. When you start thinking of people in terms of journeys, you'll see how much analogy and closeness there is between your own life and that of others.

Maybe it's a very different journey, but you feel a very strong feeling — a very strong sense of being on the same kind of journey. Then the issue is how close you are to other people and how close you should be. Albeit remaining on different paths, there are many people trying to change the world in roughly the same kind of direction.

***J**: You stated that we are all allies in the world as it exists today. That the kind of change, movements, or different human life we want to see makes us allies. What can this alliance be based on?*

CT: One of the remarkable things about the contemporary world is the alliance among people who are real seekers, who want to be at peace with and actually learn from each other. All these people searching are very much encouraged by meeting others who are searching, even if they aren't both searching in the same direction. It is quite a remarkable fact that these young seekers today are spontaneously, I would say, ecumenical.

They recognize in the other something like the same hunger. They are encouraged because they see that this kind of search is something that exists everywhere. And so, you get a kind of ecumenism of mutual interest or friendship. And the people come away strengthened in their own search.

***J**: Is ecumenism, then, a consequence of this awareness?*

CT: I'm referring to an ecumenism of friendship and exchange through which you can learn something, not just about the relationship among different denominations. That kind of ecumenical friendship can really contribute to the journey of each individual.

Again, this is the world of seekers. And from that experience, another thing grows: you want to know what it is that moves this person, and you begin to learn about their faith. You learn things that are sometimes very important for yourself. You end up resonating with various features of their hope, of their direction.

All these images, all these metaphors — journey, exploration, seekers — have the same referent: An attempt to get 'at the sense of things.' Authentic ecumenism gives me a sense that I'm moving along a path to realizing the way Jesus looked at people in my life.

***J**: Indeed, the word ecumenism, in its etymological meaning, evokes the image of the inhabited earth and therefore of the people who inhabit it. In this context, food has always assumed a peculiar value for different ethnic groups and their religious traditions. Is this the same today?*

CT: First of all, food has the ability to bring human beings together, keeping them tied to their traditions, and rediscovering themselves together in today's world. The spread of local restaurants from very different cultures is not just a matter of business, but it is a consequence of the need to find a link with a kind of food, an atmosphere, a tradition.

***J**: So this too is related to the concept of 'life as a journey' we were talking about earlier.*

CT: I think we all need and are looking for an anchoring point of our faith. It's something that is there not just in us, but outside us. Also, food can lead to the reappropriation of some traditions. I know it may seem like a paradox, but we will find that giving space to today's young seekers to move in their own way will lead to a reconnection also with tradition.

***J**: What can the presence of people who follow food prescriptions, who observe periods of fasting, say to our secularized world?*

CT: When meals have a deeper meaning than the meals them-

"I think we all need and we are all looking for an anchoring point of our faith. It's something that is there not just in us, but outside us. Also food can lead to reappropriate some very deep moves in the tradition. I know it may seem like a paradox, but we will find that giving space to today's young seekers to move in their own way will lead to a reconnection also with the tradition."

selves, they can become a special moment of union not only among people of the same religion but also among people of different religions.

I have known cases where people of different religions were invited to share, for example, the ritual meals eaten after sunset during Ramadan, iftar should be the Arabic word. The same can be said for Christmas Eve meals. When people join in those events, it's an attempt to bring people closer, to share in their differences.

***J**: Could we say that what is healthy for the body is also healthy for the soul?*

CT: I think that the soul develops through such rituals, such moments. When people eat together, it's more than just nourishing themselves; it makes it a kind of bond.

***J**: You argue that we need to find new languages that help build a dialogue. What kind of languages?*

CT: What we need are, I would call them, languages of experience. These kinds of languages can be full of metaphors that help people find their way because they feel that these metaphors express something of what they're trying to define.

> "Different religions can help to develop peace when you find someone or something really good and valuable, that can even help you in your own religious life, I mean people like the famous Sufi figures like Jalal ad-Din Rumi, people that have a tremendous impact on the world culture, and there are such people all over, of course also Christians or Jews."

We can see that many people are looking for meaning, but they don't even see that that is what they are looking for. They just feel a sense of void. And this is a terrible experience and a terrible crushing experience. And it could be relieved if some other person came along and said: 'Tell me how you feel,' and 'I am trying to figure out what you're looking for.' And we can help them to see that they are on a search just by being there as a sympathetic listener.

***J**: What is the root of empathy, understanding, and cooperation among people?*

CT: Every person that belongs to a specific ethnic group is valuable to society as a whole. The reason why I feel a deep sympathy for other seekers is because I am a seeker too. And that's the basis of it. There's a sympathetic vibration in this, in the relation to the other, that is the basis of it. And this is valid for Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists and can be valid for every human being.

***J**: You've stated that 'we are all allies as we are all seekers.' But usually, in the encounter with the other, it is easier to focus on our differences and not what we have in common. Can differences be a positive factor in building civilization?*

CT: Very often, differences are seen as an obstacle, but when you look at differences from within a relationship or a friendship, you start to understand the other in a way that you can't by reading about them in newspapers or watching them on television.

I think that there's some kind of richness that we all require when we move outside ourselves. Different cultures and religions add something to you even if it's very hard to articulate. We can find a richer sense of life coming from being able to take in the experience of other cultures.

***J**: How do we avoid fearing the other, who is different from us?*

CT: Encouraging contact, encouraging travel by young people to keep in contact between different communities. Either you know the other theoretically and in this case prejudice and ideology can win, or you meet the other and become their friend.

We have to talk to people with radically opposing views to understand how we can meet in the middle. We have to trust that people with whom we disagree deeply and are hostile to our perspective are like us in some way. This is why it's terribly important that we never lose sight of the fact that human beings are very complex and deep at many levels and that at some level we could touch something within them.

***J**: With regard to religions, the stark differences among people and the divisions that come from them are undeniable. How can religions help to build peace?*

CT: Different religions can help to develop peace when you find someone or something really good and valuable that can even help you in your own religious life, I mean people like the famous Sufi figures, Jalal Ad-Din Rumi, or people that have a tremendous impact on world culture. And there are such people from all over of various faiths.

Going back to my example, the writings of Rumi are inspiring and very widely translated and that illustrates how people can develop a completely different relation to others starting from the way in which they live their own religion.

***J**: Does this also apply to spiritual seekers? You argue that we are in an age of real spiritual searching.*

CT: We require organizations or individuals who are willing to answer this need to search in a way that doesn't coerce people to agree with any and is willing to foster a dialogue with them and explain what one or another spiritual direction is about. That's what we need, that kind of openness and contact. And that's what we find springing up in our societies. I recognize a kind of hope in people other than me, in Buddhists, Muslims, and even atheists and non-believers that I know.

I find myself happy and capable of working for various causes with people who are completely different from me. The people I'm working with at any given time come from a whole variety of different but similar hopes for transformation. They have some sense of what human beings can be, and they're deeply disappointed when we do not live up to that and are deeply happier when we do. There is some kind of parallel direction with these people and that creates a new kind of relationship, a new kind of friendship.

> "As long as any given religion is trying to dominate and make sure that everyone fits into their formula, then the manifestation of this religion in public space is an expression of an attempt to control. But once we get beyond that, once it's clear that there is no religion that can and should dominate, and the place is open for us all to express ourselves to others in a way that does not threaten others and does not force others to accept, this kind of coexistence can exist and foster a new spirit of presence and exchange in the public space."

***J**: Have difficult situations that the whole world has had to face in recent years — just think of the pandemic — pushed the human race towards the spiritual quest you speak of?*

CT: In a certain way, yes. At the end of the day, when something terrible happens, we have to answer different questions. Science answers certain questions that only it can answer. For instance, what is the virus? How could we offset it using vaccines? How does the virus spread? Science gives us the methods that we can use to stem the wide and massive spread of the disease. That's one set of issues, and in that area, science is what we need.

In another area, how we can live through this or what this means for our spiritual connections are also very important questions. Science can't answer those. Only our own spiritual search can get us close to these answers. But what we mustn't do is favor one line of thinking over the other.

***J**: In our globalized world, do religions still have a future in the public sphere?*

CT: As long as any given religion is trying to dominate and make sure that everyone fits into their formula, then the manifestation of this religion in the public space is an expression of an attempt to control. But once we get beyond that, once it's clear that there is no religion that can and should dominate, and the public space is open for us all to express ourselves to others in a way that does not threaten them or force them to accept what they cannot, this kind of coexistence can exist and foster a new spirit of presence and exchange.

A coexistence where different people are not at odds and are trying to understand and learn from each other.

The Deepest Wellspring: On the Wonder and Amazement behind Science

By Marco Bersanelli

When we find ourselves below a starry sky on a clear and moonless night and the view is really impressive, after some time, questions begin to arise such as, 'How many stars are in the sky?' Or: 'Where does the energy that makes them shine come from?' Or else the all too common 'How far are they?'

These are all relevant and fascinating questions, which direct us towards a knowledge of a scientific nature. But on closer inspection, these questions do not express the first movement of our reason in front of what we have before our eyes. They derive from another, more fundamental impression — the first vibration to which our reason is subjected to the sight of the firmament is the amazement at the pure presence of things, 'The stars!'

The physical world that science investigates presents itself as a datum and human reason is, first of all, astonished, provoked, and moved by the existence of things. This original amazement is by its nature linked to the evidence that the things around us are not our doing; the world makes itself but comes from 'another.'

In this sense, in my opinion, scientific research is inexorably rooted in the soil of the religious dimension; where does our interest in reality come from if not from the surprise that it is continuously and freely offered to us? It is difficult to account for the very existence of scientific research if we do not admit, at least tacitly, that reality presents itself as creation.

The specificity of the scientific path lies in the fact that it addresses the measurable component of things. It is evident that measurable properties are a partial, selected aspect of reality; there is much more to the world than what can be divided and measured. Therefore, if reason is man's ability to become aware of reality, it cannot be reduced to the mere ability to produce relations between measures or to define quantitative parameters. This may seem obvious, but today we are immersed in a mentality that, more or less explicitly, tends to reduce reason to its ability to measure things, severely mutilating our ability to know.

I would like to briefly highlight the way in which our reason is solicited and operates in scientific experience, and to note how, even within this particular mode of cognitive approach, it is called to involve itself far beyond its ability to quantify and deduce in analytical terms.

The adventure of scientific research starts from a feeling of amazement when facing reality. Reason is applied in 'measuring' matter and physical phenomena, but the Universe keeps offering us new mysteries to explore and understand.

What characteristics does physical reality present when we try to relate to it from a scientific point of view? Above all, in my opinion, a surprising fact is that reality 'lets itself be known,' that is, that the scientific enterprise is possible. There is, in the physical world, an order with which, in some way, human beings can establish a relationship.

This means that our reason is able to compare itself to any physical reality. For example, a microbe, or an elementary particle, or the universe of 13.8 billion years ago, when it began to expand from a state radically different from the current one. On the other hand, physical reality also appears to us unattainable in its ultimate texture.

Every scientific achievement or advancement brings us to the threshold of new questions, which invite us to penetrate even deeper. The first images obtained by the James Webb Space Telescope launched by NASA on December 25th, 2021, are emblematic of this dynamic. While they promise to answer some of the open questions about the formation of the first galaxies, new open questions already emerge on the horizon.

Einstein: 'The Greatest Emotion is the Sense of Mystery'

In this sense, scientific research highlights the nature of reality as a mystery; it exists, and a relationship of knowledge is established with it, but ultimately it escapes the complete understanding of reason because there is always something in it that exceeds what reason — even when it is understood in its pure scientific capacity — possesses or can possess.

This is the compelling condition of those who engage in research, and at the same time, it is a humbling condition in the sense that it makes us humble before the mystery of reality, whose ultimate nature is always overabundant with respect to all our cognitive and creative capacities.

The greatest scientists (more than the philosophers of science) have often lucidly and dramatically perceived this sense of mystery. Albert Einstein said: 'The most beautiful and profound emotion we can feel is the sense of mystery. Here lies the seed of all art and all true science.'

Interestingly, the characteristics of a scientific investigation in its actual unfolding resemble those of an adventure. We know the starting point (we start from the work that others before us have done) and we do not know the path, except for a few steps.

As in any adventure, we set a goal (we have a hypothesis of the scientific goal), but we are not sure that we can achieve it. And in the end, the goal that is reached, perhaps by tortuous means, is not necessarily what was imagined. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we reach a result of greater scope than our predictions, as when Arno Penzias and Bob Wilson, when they were studying the radio emissions of our galaxy in 1965, discovered the cosmic microwave background — the primordial radiation of the universe that would change the history of cosmology.

Just like in an adventure, our reason is called to use all its resources to follow the trail of truth through the different clues available. This is why a suggestive word to describe scientific activity is the word investigation; the sole use of logical capabilities, however indispensable, is not enough.

The scientific investigation, well organized around the logical-mathematical system that characterizes it, is in some way comparable to an art; intuition, aesthetic sense, imagination, and human relationships are all essential components for the possibility of discovery.

Interrogating the Real

Conceiving and carrying out an experiment or an observation has the same dynamic as formulating a question. It is like asking the reality before you, 'How are you made?' The art of experimental research is to know how to ask this question appropriately. And the progress of the research coincides with the continuous correction of this question until the answer appears evident. The teaching of science should first aim at forming young people capable of hearing and asking questions.

I would still like to point out that the classic definition of the scientific method does not consider a factor that in some way is always present in the development of any research — the unexpected. Not only certain great discoveries (such as the discovery of X-rays by Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895) but all daily life of scientific action is imbued with unforeseen errors and inconveniences that can turn into positive opportunities.

This is by no means an incitement to methodological anarchy. In fact, only if the unexpected happens in the context of a strictly applied method can it be recognized, otherwise it is pure disorder.

As Charles Nicolle wrote: 'Chance favors only those who know how to woo it.' This means being open to reality as something that can give an unexpected answer. The scientist approaches his investigation with a hypothesis but is always ready to modify it, being guided by evidence and not by preconception.

Finally, I would like to note that the communication of the scientific method (as of any method) cannot take place as learning a series of procedures, but only through a certain type of human relationship — the presence of an authoritative personality who already (or in larger measure) possesses the method and communicates it by addressing the content of the problem, and a reason ready to follow and able to identify with those who follow.

It is evident from these brief hints that a conception that reduces reason to the pure quantitative dimension (a reason which is 'the measure of all things') does not adequately explain the phenomenon of scientific knowledge. An image of reason that describes well the way research proceeds, as I live it daily, is that expressed by Luigi Giussani: 'Reason is awareness of reality according to the totality of its factors.'

In fact, as we have seen, although addressing a particular aspect of reality, scientific investigation as a dynamic of knowledge necessarily involves reason according to a far greater breadth than pure logical-deductive capacity and implies it according to different and equally decisive inflections.

So, for example, the most typically human factor is not eliminated from the rational level — that which concerns the purpose, the meaning. St. Bernard wrote: 'There are five stimuli that can incite man to science. There are men who want to know for the sake of knowing; this is low curiosity. Others try to know in order to be known; this is pure vanity. Others want to own science to resell it and earn money and honors; their motive is petty. But some desire to know to edify; this is charity. Others to be edified; this is wisdom.'

Edifying and being edified are, therefore, according to St. Bernard, the true aims of scientific action. However, if we are left to ourselves, it is inevitable to decay into one of the first three motives. A place is needed, along with human company and a continuous dialogue that recalls the true purpose of any attempt at knowledge. The first universities arose precisely with this perspective in mind. Today it is necessary to recognize and build environments in which people are called to justify the purpose of what they do and know.

Marco Bersanelli *is Professor of Physics at the University of Milan in Italy.*

Scientific investigation resembles an adventure: you know the starting point, but you don't know the path, except for some stages. As with any adventure, there is a goal you are aiming for, but you are not sure if you can reach it.

Growth Scars:

Antonella Sciarrone Alibrandi on the Importance of Difference

By Pia De Simone

'Religions can contribute to peacebuilding if they are guided by an attitude of openness, hospitality, dialogue, and the search for elements that unite rather than divide, while obviously always respecting identity.'

Thus Professor Antonella Sciarrone Alibrandi, Under-Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education, Vice-Rector, and Full Professor of Economic Law at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, Italy. Sciarrone Alibrandi is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Vatican Financial Supervisory Authority and the Director of the Private Debt Observatory at the Catholic University.

Jusur (J): *Your work at the university and your new role at the Dicastery for Culture and Education must provide you with a privileged vantage point on the space given to the other in the Catholic educational system.*

Antonella Sciarrone (AS): I believe the dimension of the encounter with the other — understood as an encounter between two singular identities in mutual respect — is truly the basis of any authentic educational relationship. When I say singular identities, I mean to underline that, although within a system, the educational relationship is always a singular relationship, that is, a relationship between two people: the educator and the educated.

It is a two-way relationship, so it should not be necessarily imagined as a flow that goes from the educator to the recipient of education; actually, in my personal experience, I have often been profoundly enriched by people with whom I have entered into an educational relationship.

J: *In this context, do you think there is a specific attitude that Catholic education takes towards the Islamic world?*

AS: The matrix is the same as any other, and it is above all one of respect and acceptance, which does not mean watering down one's identity. On the contrary, respect for the other and the dimension of acceptance are perfectly capable of coexisting with an attitude that values different identities, as taught by the very etymology of the term 'encounter,' which means 'to stand in front of' — everyone in their identity, allowing oneself to be enriched at the same time.

J: *To be in front of the other also means dealing with their difference from you. How can this not become an obstacle, but an aid in building civilization?*

AS: I think differences are always a factor in growth. Differences, in the first place, create a crisis or rather put things into question, and questioning enables a certain dynamism. Those who are so convinced of their starting point of view that they don't allow themselves to be questioned in any way by listening to the other can hardly grow at all.

In a profoundly evolving social and cultural context such as the contemporary one, I believe that the differences in approach and sensitivity of the various cultures are precisely the key to offering reliable and adequate answers to the issues of our times.

J: *The position you present presupposes a specific vision of humanity. What vision does Catholic education propose?*

AS: Catholicism is based on a very precise vision of humankind, whose ultimate features are to be found in our creed, but also in the incarnation of Jesus, which offers us a key to an anthropological understanding fundamental for relating to each other as human beings.

It is precisely in the light of this that an educational relationship can be built which truly places humankind at the center. Today, this approach is more essential than ever given certain challenges, including those related to the use of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) — an issue I have dealt with and am dealing with a great deal.

It is not a challenge anyone can contemplate facing without starting from a very specific vision of humankind. On January 10th, in Rome, during an event organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life, three representatives of the three Abrahamic religions — Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life; Chief Rabbi Eliezer Simha Weisz, Member of the Council of the Grand Rabbinate of Israel; and Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, President of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace in Muslim Societies and Chairperson of the UAE Fatwa Council — signed the 'Rome Call for AI Ethics', a document to promote the ethical development of AI.

Only within the dimension of this encounter, beginning by building a shared vision of mankind, can a question as significant for humanity as that of AI be approached constructively.

J: *Moments like this are truly significant. Are there any other experiences in which you have seen significant and constructive encounters and dialogue with the other?*

AS: One example that comes to my mind from the recent past at the Catholic University is the Festival of Arab Culture. I believe it was an excellent idea, made even more beautiful by its setting since in this way it is a concrete representation of an educational experience and a cultural encounter.

In the various activities of this festival, there were many moments that I experienced personally that have left their mark on me, underlining the effectiveness of an experience capable of reaching people, letting them know and appreciate Arab culture within a university context; it is a culture that might otherwise have remained unavailable to them.

J: *What, then, is the role of culture in facing these challenges and building bridges across different realities?*

AS: Culture is a high road for building bridges, but only provided that it is used in the right way, because while culture unites, it can also divide. An ideological cultural approach is a cultural approach that divides and does not unite. If, on the other hand, it is based on respect for the other, then it is enriched with a huge building capacity.

For this reason, Pope Francis' idea of merging the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Congregation for Education into a single entity, that is, the Dicastery for Culture and Education, seems a very effective way to combine the purely cultural approach with the educational one.

J: *In conclusion, what is the educational challenge faced not only by Catholicism but the entire world?*

AS: I believe the main educational challenge today is to perceive the great risk we face in terms of deculturalization and loss of the ability to read and write.

Worldwide, there are far too many people, especially women, who do not yet have access to education. I see the risk of deculturalization on a social level, that is, the inability to deal with all issues in a sufficiently in-depth way, to equip oneself with adequate categories to reach the core of things. From this point of view, the challenge is to be able to break the bread of culture in such a way as to enable it to be distributed everywhere.

We must not keep it inside academic institutions and intellectual conferences but spread it out using all the modern channels and tools we can, so that everyone will be able to thrive by drawing on the sources of knowledge rather than falling back into a frightening human void.

The Couscous Cure: Ramadan's Golden Grains

By Khaled Azab

Couscous is more than just a meal. It takes part in shaping the culinary identity of North Africa, where food is a cultural act charged with the heritage of an entire civilization. Our food practices allow us to see our cultural life through food, and this perspective allows us to understand the nature of couscous on the North African table. Couscous expresses the cultural interconnection of countries from Egypt to Mauritania, and it is a dish that integrates with the environment in which it is prepared.

In the northwest of the Nile Delta in Egypt, couscous comes as a side dish with duck and goose — waterfowl that have been present in the area since the time of the pharaohs. In Morocco, on the other hand, couscous is prepared with mutton and beef. In Sfax, Tunisia, it is served with local fish. In Adrar, southern Algeria, other types of couscous that are made from barley instead of wheat are used since the latter is not available in the area.

A Ramadan Staple

Couscous is strongly linked to tradition. During the month of Ramadan in the city of Constantine in Algeria, it is customary to serve 'masfouf' — a dish of couscous made with butter, sugar, sultanas, and fine couscous grains every day for 'sohour' (the last meal of the day before the start of the fast). If we walk around the oldest squares of Cairo at 'sohour' time or after sunset, we can find carts selling couscous with milk, sugar, and sultanas.

In Morocco, on the other hand, couscous is linked to holidays, as the local proverb says: "No Friday without couscous." So, every Friday after prayers at the mosque, Moroccans gather around the table to eat a meal of couscous. If you are invited to a Moroccan home for a 'Friday lunch,' keep in mind that you will be eating couscous with meat, squash, turnips, onions, and carrots, etc.

In some Moroccan homes, couscous is presented over the traditional brazier, where coals are placed to cook the food and keep it hot and delicious. During festivals and on 'Lailat al Qadr' or 'the Night of Destiny' — one of the last nights of the month of Ramadan — people distribute bowls of couscous to worshippers in the mosques so that everyone, rich and poor, can eat.

Two Millennia Old and Countless Recipes

The history of couscous goes back thousands of years, to the era of the Amazigh king Masinisa, who ruled Algeria from BC 238 to 148. In some ancient Algerian cemeteries, utensils for preparing couscous have been found, but I believe that this dish dates back even further. In fact, its inventors, the Amazigh, resorted to this dish because it broke the monotony of bread.

Nowadays, there are more than three hundred ways to prepare this dish, something that has not happened with any other dish in the world. As a dish that is widespread on both shores of the Mediterranean, couscous was included in the UNESCO intangible world heritage list in a dossier that brought together the politically divided but culinarily united Maghreb countries.

There, couscous is an affirmation of life, starting with the role of women in its preparation, now in decline due to industrialization. Modernity has, in fact, erased all the imagery that accompanied the home-made transformation of wheat, barley, or maize flour into grains of couscous — an operation accompanied by improvised songs that spread joy in the hearts of those who tried their hand at preparing the famous dish.

Researchers have studied this intangible heritage by collecting

pieces of it from the mouths of grandmothers and by immortalizing them in written form before they disappeared. In doing so, they have also saved the story of the 'fatl' or 'fatil' — a word of Amazigh origin that indicates the transformation of flour into small grains by rolling it between the hands.

It is a feminine, complicated, and time-consuming task that requires experience and patience. Originally, women would sit on the ground for hours, bent over a bowl called 'gefna' (or 'tarhalith' in Amazigh) made of clay and wood or, more recently, metal. A little flour of medium thickness was placed in the bowl, sprinkled with salted water, and stirred slowly while gradually adding more flour and water. When the grains began to form, they were passed through a sieve with medium-sized holes to homogenize the size of the grains and, once the desired amount of couscous had been obtained, it was moved to the steaming pot.

The preparation of couscous was one of the economic livelihoods of many poor families in the Maghreb. Women used to prepare it for other families, and in the state of Adrar in southern Algeria they still do. People gather in one house to prepare couscous, following the various steps and dividing up the work, like a real industrial assembly line to produce large quantities of the grain. There are also women who prepare it themselves in their homes and then sell it.

Couscous is cooked in a 'keskes' — a deep pot originally made of ceramic with holes in the bottom that rests on another pot, like modern steam pots. The manufacture of this type of pot developed in cities such as Fez, Marrakesh, Tlemcen, and Kairouan, where ancient texts have been found that tell the stories of potters who used to throw this type of pot by hand.

Today, metal and especially aluminum pots are taking the place of ceramic ones, threatening the creation of the traditional pots — except in the Alqusur (Alwahat) regions that stretch across the great Sahara from Egypt to Mauritania. The size of the couscous pot was relative to the number of family members and their hospitality rituals. It ranged from a capacity of two liters up to one hundred liters in the case of a 'kazal' — the pot used for feasts and for breaking the family fast during Ramadan. The kazal is passed down in families from generation to generation and can be lent to neighbors.

Couscous was called 'taam,' which means food in Arabic, and is mentioned in a book on the life of Moroccan Sufis, 'Al-Tasawwuf Ila Rijal Al-Tasawwuf' by Abu Ya'qub Tadili. Couscous lent itself to any variation because it was the food par excellence for everyone. There was the royal couscous with four types of meat in one dish but also couscous with chicken, fish, chickpeas and eggs, red pumpkin, prawns and peppers, tender broad beans; couscous with seven vegetables; couscous with prunes, sultanas, icing, sugar, and saffron buried inside; or with the sheep's whole head; right up to Sicilian couscous, which was popular in the city of Trapani, brought to Sicily by fishermen coming from Tunisia. It is a couscous with an all-Italian flavor made with fish and sweet pepper.

The scholar Mohamed Hobeida — author of the book 'Vegetable Morocco: Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century History and Biology' — cites many texts that tell the story of couscous in Europe. In 1580, the Italian recipe for couscous reached the cook of Pope Pius V, who steamed it with broth and beef and sprinkled it with grated cheese, sugar, and cinnamon.

Hobeida also refers to the recipe for Spanish couscous, written in 1611. In France, at the end of the seventeenth century, couscous became known through the Moroccan ambassador Ben Aisha, when newspapers of the time wrote that it was his favorite meal.

There is a proverb that says that the Maghreb countries begin where you eat couscous and end where you stop eating it. However, this meal has spread all over the world from the Maghreb, and has remained a symbol of those countries, their heritage, and their life.

***Khaled Azab** is a former director of communication at the Library of Alexandria, a writer, and an expert on Islamic architecture.*

Salman Rushdie On Mount Arafa: How Islam Can Drive Away Discord

The Sermon of Arafa

Less than a month before the assassination attempt on Salman Rushdie, who was accused of offending Islam, and during the pilgrimage to Mecca — one of the greatest Islamic rites that unite all Muslims regardless of their ethnicity, language, or school of legal thought — Muhammad bin Abdul-Karim Al-Issa, the Secretary-General of the Muslim World League and President of the Organization of Muslim Scholars, gave a sermon on the Day of Arafa in which he asked his audience to refrain from harming those who offend Islam.

Pilgrims of the House of God, Muslims:

I enjoin you, and I enjoin myself, to vie and strive to do good deeds. God Almighty says: 'And vie one with another for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a paradise as wide as are the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who ward off (evil)' (Quran 3:133).

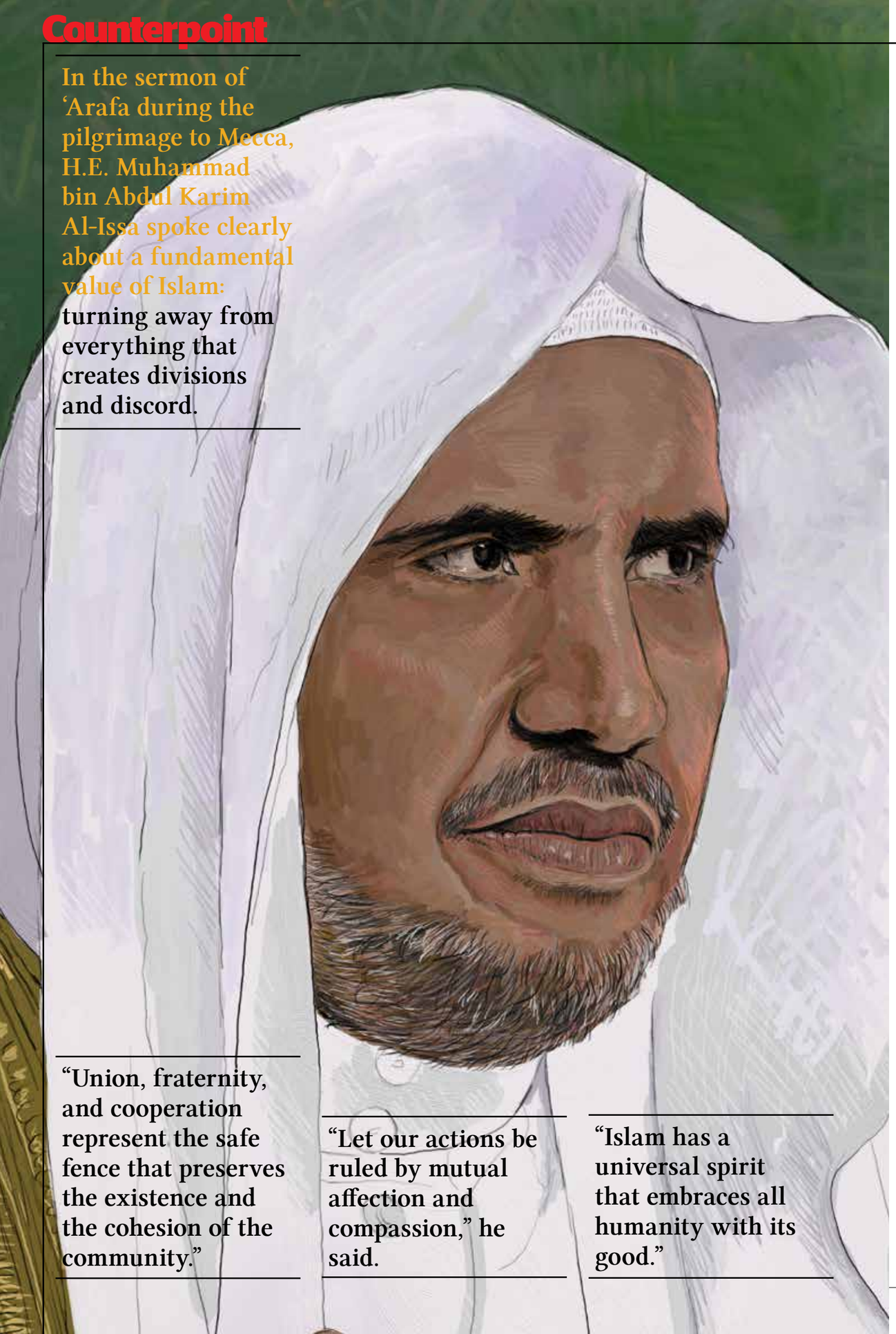
God in his glory says: 'Do good, so that you may be successful' (Quran 22:77). Servants of God, know that vying for doing good deeds includes the endeavor to submit oneself to the Islamic values that shape a Muslim's behavior and educate them well; the same values our noble Prophet (peace be upon him) adhered to so that his Lord, the Almighty, said of him: 'You are of a tremendous nature' (Quran 68:4).

And the Prophet himself said: 'Verily, those who will be closest to my heart and who will sit closest to me on the Day of Judgment are the most virtuous among you'.

Good nature is generally defined as a value shared by all people

Counterpoint

In the sermon of ‘Arafa during the pilgrimage to Mecca, H.E. Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa spoke clearly about a fundamental value of Islam: turning away from everything that creates divisions and discord.



“Union, fraternity, and cooperation represent the safe fence that preserves the existence and the cohesion of the community.”

“Let our actions be ruled by mutual affection and compassion,” he said.

“Islam has a universal spirit that embraces all humanity with its good.”

that is equally appreciated by Muslims and non-Muslims, for it is righteous behavior in words and deeds. God Almighty says: ‘speak kindly to mankind’ (Quran 2:83). And he says: ‘the good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then the one you are in a feud with will be like a close friend’ (Quran 41:34).

As for facing ignorance and stupidity, God Almighty says: ‘keep to forgiveness, and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the violent’. (Quran 7:199). He also says: ‘so have patience! God’s promise is the very truth, and let not those who have no certainty make you impatient’ (Quran 30:60).

This means being careful not to be involved in a contest of insults or its consequences. A Muslim with firm values pays no attention to the violent, the prejudiced, or those who are a hindrance, carrying God Almighty’s words with them.

‘And when they hear vain talk they withdraw from it and say: We do our deeds, you do yours. Peace be unto you! We want nothing from the violent’ (Quran 28:55).

A Muslim knows that by engaging in conflict with such people the Muslim contributes to raising their prestige and their success. But this is what makes them happy, this is what they expect. However, the dangers of deceit will be revealed and the plain offense will be opposed by means of Islam’s wisdom.

Pilgrims of the House of God, Muslims:

One of Islam’s values is moving away from all things that lead to discord, hatred, and division, so that our interactions are ruled by mutual love and kindness. These values are the principal meaning of ‘holding fast to the rope of God,’ for God Almighty says: ‘and hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of God, and do not separate’ (Quran 3:103).

Union, fraternity, and cooperation represent the safety valve that preserves the existence and cohesion of the community and good interaction with others.

This testifies to the fact that Islam has a universal spirit that embraces all humanity with its good. Our noble Prophet is the one who said: ‘The best people are the most helpful to others’. This is why Islamic legislation is a sublime example of humanity without double standards, one that does not alter its principles.

Islam wanted to do everybody good and to attune the hearts of all people. From these values, the light of Islam spread across the whole world, reaching the four corners of the earth, where men who believed in what they promised God kept doing good. This righteous guide has generated rightly guided followers on the path of Islam. And well-established scholars also had a blessed influence, for they took the responsibility of shedding light on misconceptions about Islam.

Statistics on the pilgrimage – Year 2022

Number of pilgrims	Men	Women
899,353	484,458	412,895

Countries of origin of the pilgrims	
Saudi Arabia	119,434
Other countries	779,919
Other Arab countries	21.4%
Asian countries	53.8%
African countries	13.2%
Europe, America e Australia	11.65%

Source: Saudi Arabia National Institute for Statistics

Statistics on Arafa's sermon:

600 million visits to the Manarat al-Haramayn website during the live broadcast of Arafa's sermon.

14 languages		
Malay (29%)	English (18%)	Urdu (13%)
Hausa (11%)	Bengali (9%)	French (4%)
Turkish (3%)	Tamil (2.3%)	Chinese, Hindi, Farsi, Russian (2%)
Swahili (1.5%)	Spanish (1.2%)	

Source: Muslim World League

x t i s s u e:

Face, Identity and Difference

Rowan Williams
Olivier Roy
Joseph Weiler
Patricio Pron
Adel El Siwi
Said Bensaid Alaoui
Giovanni Gobber
Inaam Kachachi
Ignacio Gómez de Liaño
Stefano Arduini
Mohmed Khidr
Ismail Serageldin
Mohamed Makhzangi
Abdel Salam Ben Abdelali

«Eat and drink, but do not waste.
Surely He does not like the wasteful»

(Qur'an 7:31)

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