FOOD AND HEALTH IN THE BAHA'I FAITH

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This report is based on on-going doctoral work that sets out to explore the place of food in the Baha'i worldview as portrayed in Baha'i writings and reflected in the views and practices of contemporary Baha'is. Food-related teachings are briefly described under the headings of food, health and healing, vegetarianism; fasting and commensality. Attention is drawn to some similarities and differences between the food discourse of the Baha'i Faith and other religions. A focus on food and justice is briefly outlined in which food conduct is conceived of as a practical expression of ethical requirements.

Food has played an important role in religious traditions; for example in publicly affirming faith, in demonstrating acceptance of religious authority, as a marker of group identity/separateness, by promoting fellowship through commensality or as a vehicle for mourning, purification, penitence, supplication, or commemoration. Religious dietary codes often exclude whole categories of foods from consumption, determined by age, sex, social or physiological status, time of day or year. They may also prescribe specific foods for particular occasions (Fieldhouse, 1995). At first glance, dietary codes are not prominent in the Baha'i sacred writings. Rather than setting out rules, Baha'i teachings provide guidance and emphasise the responsibility of individual believers to live a virtuous life. The idea that diet and food practices are constitutive of a virtuous life is an old one, though the practical expression of such ideals has varied historically (Foucault, 1990). In ancient Greece moderation and self-mastery in diet were indications of rationality and capacity to conduct oneself successfully in civic life. For the Romans detailed dietary regimens guided everyday conduct; individuals had a moral responsibility for self-care and preservation of health. In early Christianity food and appetite became linked with corporeality, lust and worldly pleasure; ascetic practices, including restriction of food intake, were required as acts of denial aimed at suppressing desire (Turner, 1996). Though science and morality began to break away from the Church in the modern age, religious conviction continued to inspire the efforts of eighteenth and nineteenth century dietary reformers in the West, and later melded with scientific rationalism in the persons of twentieth century founders of modern nutritional science like Wilbur Atwater. Followers of modern secular dietary advice in avoiding 'bad' high-fat foods and maintaining 'healthy weights' are still eating virtue. The Baha'i Faith, with its emphasis on the harmony of science and religion presents a singular food discourse that invokes the virtues of naturalness, simplicity, moderation, compassion and justice and which upholds both the material and spiritual value of food.

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BAHA'I FAITH

The Baha'i Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. Originating in mid-nineteenth century Persia it developed from roots in Babism, a messianic sect of Shi'a Islam. The founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah (Glory of God) claimed to be a new prophet whose mission is the unification of all humanity in a divinely ordained Most Great Peace. Baha'u'llahs theology is a synthesis of the western religious traditions of asceticism and transcendence and the eastern traditions of mysticism and immanence (Saiedi, 2000). Baha'is also see a linkage between spiritual transformation of the individual and that of society as a whole and place much emphasis on creating institutions and processes that advance consensual decision-making and support social justice. In the words of the Guardian[1];

> "It proclaims the necessity and inevitability of the unification of mankind . . . It, moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and orderly progress of human society. It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind" (Shoghi Effendi, 1953).

Middle-Eastern Baha'is struggled against persecution and internal dissent as their new religion sought to establish itself. At the end of the nineteenth century the Baha'i teachings were carried to North America through the missionary work of early adherents and small numbers of converts began to make pilgrimages to Akka to visit Abdul-Baha, the spiritual successor to Baha'u'llah. Within the first two decades of the new century Abdul-Baha himself travelled extensively in North America and Europe, sowing the seeds for the subsequent rapid world-wide expansion of the faith. By 1988 only 6% of the world Baha'i population was Iranian. Numerically, North American and European Baha'i communities have remained relatively small, although in the former instance crucial for the organisation of the Faith (Smith & Momen, 1989). The current world Baha'i population is estimated at about seven million, spread throughout 232 countries (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2001). The Baha'i International Community is accredited as a member of the body of Non-Governmental Organisations of the United Nations with consultative status in the Economic and Security Council. It operates numerous social and economic development projects world-wide, including approximately 650 schools and 7 radio stations (Stockman & Winters, 1997).

FOOD-RELATED TEACHINGS

As noted above, pronounced dietary codes and proscriptions are absent in the Baha'i sacred writings [the works of the Bab[2], Baha'u'llah and Abdul-Baha]. Rather than rules there is an emphasis on guidance and on the responsibility of individual believers to live a virtuous life. Aspects of food and food conduct that are explicitly addressed in the Baha'i sacred writings include the relationship of food to health and healing, vegetarianism, fasting, hospitality and commensality.

Food, Health and Healing

Baha'is are charged with the responsibility of looking after their own health, for the preservation of bodily health and well-being is necessary in order to pursue a life of service and devotion. The body is regarded as the temple of the human spirit and

[1]On the death of Abdu'l-Baha, the son of the prophet Baha'u'llah, in 1921 Shoghi Effendi [Abd'ul-Baha's eldest grandson] became the first [and only] Guardian of the Faith, invested with sole authority for interpreting Baha'i teachings.

[2]The Bab was the prophet-founder of Babism, widely seen as a precursor to the Baha'i Faith.

consequently should be treated as a willing, obedient and efficient servant. This requirement for self-care rejects both ascetic and hedonistic lifestyles, for while asceticism symbolises disengagement with everyday life—contrary to Baha'i commitment to community involvement and service, hedonism shows an undue concern with selfish desires. Instead moderation is advised in the form of a 'balanced natural diet', without excess and adapted to climate and type of work in which the body is engaged - a formulation which differs little from contemporary nutritional science concepts. However, whereas nutritional science requires of people conscious choice of a 'balanced diet' based on knowledge of nutrient values and a sophisticated awareness of commercial and educational messages, Abdul Baha invokes a theory of natural selection of foods derived from inherent human capacities. He suggests that humans, like animals, can instinctively select the foods they need for health—but that their ability to do so is obscured by foolish and unnatural modes of living, by which he means ignoring the principle of moderation. *"When the constitution is in a state of equilibrium there is no doubt that whatever is relished will be beneficial to health."* (Abdu'l-Baha, 1978). The idea that humans choose certain foods because they are programmed to know what is physiologically good for them has a perennial appeal. There is evidence of a human genetic predisposition to preference for sweet tastes which would have been adaptive in evolutionary terms, as sweetness acted as a marker for calories. However under conditions of overexposure to sweet calorie dense foods, such behaviour becomes maladaptive. There is also some evidence of an innate longing for salt. Beyond this the evidence is persuasive if not conclusive that culture rather than biology is the main factor guiding human food selection.

The idea of 'naturalness' also arises in Baha'i writings in regard to food combinations.

> "But man hath perversely continued to serve his lustful appetites, and he would not content himself with simple foods. Rather, he prepared for himself food that was compounded of many ingredients, of substances differing one from the other . . . and he abandoned the temperate and moderation of a natural way of life. The result was the engendering of diseases both violent and diverse" (Abdu'l-Baha, 1978).

It is not clear whether this criticism of dietary practices refers to the use of food transformed through processing of some kind, or to the combining of different foodstuffs in one meal. Both ideas certainly have a long history, though food combining is generally dismissed by the contemporary scientific establishment as an unfounded fad. On the other hand, the idea that as food becomes more removed from its natural state—more artificial or 'compounded' it becomes less healthy and more likely to cause disease has a certain resonance with contemporary scientific theory that lays substantial blame for chronic disease on diets rich in fat and sugar—which means essentially, the products of food manufacturing and processing.

Baha'i teachings give food a preeminent role not only in maintaining health, but also as the preferred means for treatment of disease. *'Treat disease through diet, by preference, refraining from the use of drugs; and if you find what is required in a single herb, do not resort to a compounded medicament'* (Baha'u'llah, 1992). Disease is conceived of as resulting from a disturbance of balance in the body, a concept familiar in ancient medical systems. Greek humoural theory and practice was spread widely by Christian, Jewish and Muslim physicians and in Persia a unique blend of Quranic and Hippocratic medical principles and practice emerged which later blended with modern scientific medicine to produce a spectrum of beliefs and practices (Ebrahimnejad, 2000). Disease being a consequence of bodily imbalance, treatment consisted in simply consuming those foods that provide the diminished constituent, thereby restoring balance.

However Baha'i teachings recognise that the state of human knowledge and understanding changes over time and that formulations derived in one time and place do not have universal or eternal application. Therefore in matters of health, particularly regarding diet and nutrition, Baha'is are enjoined to consult 'qualified practitioners' and to seek the best medical advice available to them at the time. Ironically, modern scientific medical training pays scant attention to nutrition and the role of food in health and disease. Baha'i teachings recognise this deficiency but nevertheless look forward to a time when all illness will be treated by food.

> "The science of medicine is still in a condition of infancy: it has not reached maturity; but when it has reached this point, cures will be performed by things which are not repulsive

> to the smell and taste of man; that is to say by aliments, fruits and vegetables which are agreeable to the taste and have an agreeable smell" (Abdu'l-Baha, 1964)

It is interesting in the light of Abdul-Bata's words to note that right now we are seeing a tremendous explosion of scientific as well as commercial interest in 'functional foods' and 'nutraceuticals'. These latest developments in rational food science provide a sort of endorsement for what older traditions and popular belief have maintained all along; food is medicine.

Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism has been presented through the ages as a strategy for achieving both spiritual and material goals, and for advancing both individual health and collective well-being. Themes of health, economics, ecology and spirituality interconnect and draw strength from each other. All these themes appear in Baha'i teachings.

Animal food is not forbidden in Baha'i teachings. All foods are available for human consumption, though this permissiveness is mediated by health, ethical and ecological considerations that uphold the value and desirability of vegetarianism. Meat is acknowledged to be a nutritious and sometimes even essential food, for example for rehabilitation of the sick, but nevertheless it is undoubtedly possible to live without meat.

> "What will be the food of the future? Fruit and grains. The time will come when meat will no longer be eaten. Medical science is only in its infancy, yet it has shown that our natural food is that which grows out of the ground. The people will gradually develop up to the condition of this natural food" (Grundy, 1979).

There appears to be some ambiguity around the permissibility of meat. Abdul-Baha states that God determined the food of every living being and to eat contrary to that determination is not approved. As evidence of the naturalness of vegetarianism he then discourses at length on the nature of animal and human dentition and concludes that mankind's food is intended to be cereal and fruit and not meat. Further, because meat is both nutritionally unnecessary and is an inefficient source of energy the killing of animals has moral implications, being contrary to pity and compassion. Refraining from killing animals will enhance spiritual qualities. In Islamic Law foods are classified into one of five categories: obligatory; recommended; neutral; disapproved; or prohibited. It seems that in Baha'i teachings meat is being treated as a disapproved or perhaps a neutral item: consumption is not prohibited but there is merit in abstaining. Islamic Law also recognises that necessity may legitimately override usual observance; for example a fast should be broken if there is a threat to health. The Baha'i suggestion that meat is of particular value for nourishing the sick appears to follow a similar line of reasoning. A permissive stance is also in line with Islamic belief that God does not want to make life unnecessarily difficult for His people.

There is also no inconsistency in permitting a practice while at the same time drawing attention to its moral shortcomings and advocating for its elimination over time. Other Baha'i Laws were only to be introduced gradually as people developed the capacity to respond to the requisite responsibilities, and inconsistencies in practice are accepted. For example smoking is prohibited during the Nineteen Day Fast only to Baha'is of Middle Eastern origin. Berman, from a Jewish perspective similarly maintains that permitting meat consumption was a concession by God to man's imperfection and that humans are still not morally ready to forgo the eating of flesh (Berman, 1982). The presumption that there will be a time when humans do not eat meat suggests that changing eating habits are part and parcel of the pursuit of spiritual progression. The relinquishment of meat is an individual choice that takes on value as a symbol of this spiritual progression. There are interesting parallels here to Norbert Elias' concept of a 'curve of civilisation' which views the gradual de-emphasis of meat in the diet as a marker of refinement and civilised behaviour (Elias, 1978).

Fasting

The Baha'i fast bears a marked resemblance to Islamic practice, the context in which it emerged. The Baha'i fasting period, which lasts nineteen days from the second to the twentieth of March every year, involves complete abstention from food and drink from sunrise till sunset. It is essentially a period of meditation and prayer and its significance and purpose are fundamentally spiritual in character.

The fast is binding on Baha'is in all countries but it is an individual obligation, not enforceable by Baha'i administrative institutions. It applies to all believers from the age of maturity, [fifteen] until seventy, with exemptions for:

- travellers (under specified conditions)
- the sick;
- women who are pregnant or nursing;
- women who menstruating, who must instead repeat the phrase 'Glorified be God, the Lord of Splendour and Beauty' ninety-five times between one noon and the next;
- those engaged in heavy labour, who are advised to be discrete and restrained in availing themselves of this exemption.

Unlike in the Islamic model, fasters who are unable to meet their commitment do not have to make any sort of restitution or make up the missed days later. Nor are sexual relations prohibited during fasting periods.

Baha'is are allowed to fast at other times of the year but this is not encouraged, and is rarely done. Fasting itself is only acceptable if it is done purely out of love for God, reminiscent of the importance of 'intent' in the Muslim Ramadan fast.

HOSPITALITY AND COMMENSALITY

Food sharing is an almost universal medium for expressing fellowship; it embodies values of hospitality, duty, giving, sacrifice and compassion, and has been a common theme in religious traditions. Muhammad exalted the virtues of hospitality and commended believers to accept food that was offered even if it meant breaking a fast, for to refuse such food was to refuse God's bounty and to neglect an opportunity to honour a noble act. In the Sufi tradition particularly, hospitality assumed tremendous importance and endures in the form of feeding stations in Sufi centres and at Moulid festivals. Following in this Middle Eastern tradition Baha'u'llah embraced the importance of hospitality as a means to creating unity and justice. However, Baha'is are cautioned by their administrative institutions not to presume on the hospitality of others and not to let others take undue advantage of their own hospitality (Walbridge, 1996), an injunction reminiscent of Muhammad's counsel that hospitality which extends beyond three days becomes charity.

While food may be provided to specific individuals as a gesture of hospitality or act of charity it is also commonly shared in fellowship in the communal context of a feast. The Baha'i 'feast' though has a very particular meaning. It first appears in the scriptures as a command to entertain nineteen people every nineteen days even if one is only able to give them water. Baha'u'llah explains that its purpose is to 'bind hearts together' with material means. Early feasts emphasised hospitality and were purely social occasions. Gradually though the feast became a more formalised religious event, combing a meal and devotions. A third element, that of conducting community business, was added by the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi. The feast as it is now practised differs from religious gatherings in other faiths in being exclusive to members of the faith. However, non-Baha'i visitors should be welcomed at the social portion of the feast, recalling the priority accorded to hospitality. The type and amount of food provided at a feast is not prescribed but is rather a function of local custom and resources, indicating that it is the symbolic rather than the material value of the food that is important. Food is commonly served at gatherings on Baha'i holy days, such as Naw Ruz [new Year], and the birthday of the prophet. On such occasions, which are open to non-Bahais food is either catered or pot-luck style. There are some concerns in certain North American Baha'i communities that the voluntary provision of food as a sort of community service could become a source of stereotyping and exploitative expectations of Persian women particularly.

A JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

Justice is the fundamental virtue in the teachings of Baha'u'llah, who writes about it's two aspects: the importance of human effort to establish justice in this world—which is required for a world community to act in unity; and divine justice as a critical aspect of the covenant between God and His people. The harmony and the unity of humankind is the signal purpose of justice; a justice which is achieved through practical material, moral and spiritual progress of individuals and at all levels of social organisation.

Individuals must shed their attitudes of selfishness, greed, competitiveness and apathy and replace them with those of altruism, reciprocity, cooperation and fairness. By acting justly—that is by following God's law as contained in the ordinances of Bahaullah—individuals through their daily mundane acts make a personal and cumulative contribution to the bringing into being of just institutions and social relationships. Social institutions must reflect and support individual moral values and spiritual development, and international perspectives must replace narrow national and sectarian views. Justice

requires the removal of oppression, prejudice and discrimination at all levels of society, so that injustices based on perceptions of difference cannot be sustained.

In my doctoral studies I am pursuing the contention that the Baha'i vision of justice can be understood through its discourse on food. Food can be viewed as an ethical substance and food conduct [individual and societal] interpreted as a pragmatic symbol/outcome of ethical beliefs. Prevailing ideas of what constitutes justice will affect how food is treated as a material and symbolic good by individuals and in society. Contrariwise, our relationship to food can be interpreted as a product of our sense of justice. By examining a range of food-related topics including ecological stewardship, human interdependence with nature, vegetarianism; alleviation of hunger and poverty; striving for unity through commensality, hospitality, preservation of health, and fasting as spiritual discipline, I hope to test the claim that food provides one practical way through which Baha'is can achieve their ethical goals.

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