

individual believers to live a virtuous life. Food rules and practices are often used as boundary markers in religions and as a way for believers to assert their faith identities. The absence of such prescriptive dietary codes in Bahá'í teachings exemplifies the Bahá'í concept of the unity of humankind by removing one boundary between races, cultures, and religions. There is no symbolic value attached to particular foods, nor are there foods that are associated with specific rituals or celebrations. Generally speaking Bahá'ís follow local dietary custom. Nevertheless, there are three aspects of food that are explicitly addressed in Bahá'í sacred writings: the relationship of diet to health, fasting, and commensality as exemplified in the Nineteen Day Feast.

Role of Religion in Shaping Daily Diet

There is a special concern for the strength and wellbeing of the body as the temple of the human spirit. The body should be a willing, obedient, and efficient servant, kept in good health so that the Bahá'í can devote all his or her energy to serving Bahá'u'lláh's purpose. To this end, Bahá'ís are expected to take responsibility for looking after their own health, in which diet plays an essential role. Both asceticism and hedonism are to be avoided; the former because it is an inappropriate withdrawal from the world and a rejection of what God has provided, and the latter because one should not be preoccupied with material possessions. Instead, moderation is advised as a means to achieve a state of "detachment" necessary to attain true understanding of God's will.

The ideal regime is a balanced natural diet that is adapted to local climate and to the type of work in which the body is engaged. Although animal food is not forbidden, meat-eating is considered to be only a temporary necessity of the current age, one that will give way in the future to vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is portrayed as being a compassionate practice, for the killing of animals blunts the spiritual qualities of the human race. A meatless diet is also natural in that it uses simple foods that grow from the ground. Finally, vegetarianism is just; one should not eat lavishly while others starve.

Food is not only seen to be the chief way of maintaining health, but also the preferred means for treatment of disease. Health and disease are conceived of in terms of balance and bodily equilibrium reminiscent of Greek humoral theory and Ayurvedic conceptions of hot and cold. Disease arises from disturbances to the balance of the body, which can be restored through consumption of food containing the necessary elements to bring it back to health. Although a time is foreseen when improved medical knowledge and understanding will enable all illness to be treated by food, Bahá'ís are enjoined to take full advantage of the best that current medicine has to offer and to seek the services of competent physicians when they are ill.

Fasting and Feasting

There is only one annual fast prescribed for Bahá'ís. The precepts of the fast are laid down in the *Kitab-I-Aqdas*, or Most Holy Book, of Bahá'u'lláh

and along with obligatory prayer it is the most important of Bahá'í ritual obligations. The fast bears a marked resemblance to Islamic practice, the context in which it emerged. The Bahá'í fasting period lasts nineteen days from the second to the twentieth of March, and requires complete abstention from food and drink between the hours of sunrise and sunset. It is a period of meditation and prayer, a chance to renew one's spiritual self, and a reminder of the need to abstain from selfish desires. The fast is binding on Bahá'ís in all countries but it is an individual obligation, not enforceable by Bahá'í administrative institutions. It applies to all believers from the age of maturity (thought of as age fifteen) until seventy, with exemptions for travelers under specified conditions; the sick; women who are menstruating, pregnant, or nursing; and those engaged in heavy labor, 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 offer any sort of restitution or make up the missed days later. Nor are sexual relations prohibited during fasting periods. Bahá'ís 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. This is reminiscent of the importance of niyyah or intent in the Islamic fast of Ramadan.

Feast has a particular meaning in the Bahá'í Faith, referring to the monthly community meeting known as the Nineteen-Day Feast. The original purpose of the Bahá'í feast was a means of creating fellowship, and is rooted in the Persian tradition of hospitality. Bahá'u'lláh enjoined believers to entertain nineteen people every nineteen days even if only water was provided. Over time the feast shifted from being a display of personal hospitality to becoming an institutional event. The modern Nineteen-Day Feast is held in each Bahá'í community on the first day of each Bahá'í month, and consists of three parts. The first is devotional and consists of readings from the Bahá'í sacred writings; the second is a consultative meeting where administrative and community issues are discussed; the third is a social gathering at which food is served. What is served is at the discretion of the host and is guided by personal preference and local custom. The Nineteen-Day Feast is intended only for the members of the Bahá'í community; however, non-Bahá'í visitors should be received hospitably at the social portion of the feast only.

The sharing of food is an important feature of Bahá'í social events. Food sharing also occurs through charitable activity and social action. However, where local community development projects supported by Bahá'ís involve food, these usually take the form of agricultural development rather than food distribution.

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