

# Zabiha-Meat Madness

by Abdur-Rahman ibn Yusuf

THERE IS NO doubt that there is great confusion regarding the permissibility of meats in certain countries, especially in the United States, and regarding what is lawful and what is unlawful to consume. Adding to this confusion are some of the terms used in the process.

## *Halal and Zabiha*

Once while dining at a person's house in the US, the host pointed out to a guest from the UK that a particular dish on the table was *zabiha* and that another was *ḥalāl*. The bewildered guest had never heard of the term *zabiha* used in this context. Literally, *zabiha* (more accurately written, *dhabiḥa*) means "slaughtered animal." Was not all *ḥalāl* meat, the guest wondered, supposed to be slaughtered according to a particular rite, and thus qualify as *zabiha*? Why was the host then calling one dish *zabiha* and the other "only *ḥalāl*"? Could it be that *zabiha* meant something else? Maybe it was a Judaic or Christian term and this meat had been purchased from a non-Muslim source. Or did it mean super- or ultra-*ḥalāl* meat of sorts, or perhaps signify some kind of organic meat? One of the local guests clarified, explaining that some people in the US use the term *zabiha* for meat slaughtered by a Muslim. This was to differentiate it from meat that many purchase from the regular markets under the assumption that it is from the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) and thus *ḥalāl* even though not hand-slaughtered by a Muslim.

## Meat in the US and the People of the Book

Many people assume that the United States—and, for that matter, Canada, the UK, and many other European countries—are Christian nations. This is erroneous. Although many of the inhabitants of these countries profess to be Christian, this affiliation of theirs does not extend much past a personal or perhaps communal level. On the state level, these countries are openly secular, promote separation of church and state, and would hardly accept being labeled Christian nations. Some Muslim scholars from abroad, many of whom are not accurately informed of the religious composition of the US, sometimes pass the *fatwā* that the meat in the United States is lawful, citing that the country is Christian. No doubt, meat slaughtered by a Christian or Jew in accordance with the injunctions of their scriptures cannot be considered impermissible, as Allāh has made it lawful in the Qur'ān: "And the food of those who have been given the Book is permitted to you" (Qur'ān 5:5). However, carelessly purchasing or eating meat from any source in the US with the excuse of being in a Christian country and thus eating the meat of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) is a gross error in judgment born out of ignorance of the true circumstances.

When purchasing meat from a regular grocery store, it is generally impossible to learn whether the slaughterer was a Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Baha'i, atheist, or, for argument's sake, Muslim; and even if it is theoretically possible to find out, the informational costs and bureaucratic barriers are too prohibitive for it to be feasible. If we then make the venturesome assumption that the slaughterer is a Christian or a

Jew, the adherence of these, especially the former, to the laws of slaughter laid down in their scriptures is tenuous, as a few moments' examination of practicing Christians and Jews will show. There are, furthermore, numerous documented reports of eyewitness accounts of animals being stunned or shot and allowed to die before actually being put to the knife, thus rendering them dead before slaughtered—in a word, carrion. The US Department of Agriculture sometimes appoints representatives to watch for cadavers and remove them from the processing line, but how regular this practice is and how diligently the appointees carry out what they are commissioned to do does not inspire great confidence.

The evidence of abstaining from that which is indubitably unlawful needs no repeating. But we are faced here with a doubtful situation. In the first place, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the odds of finding lawful meat in US markets are slim, and probability that leans heavily in favor of one conclusion or another is recognized by Islamic law in matters of practice that bear an element of social significance, such as the food consumed by tens of thousands of Muslims. And in food-related matters, we learn from Islamic law that when the scale of surety tips toward the side of doubt, lawfulness is held in check until we can substantiate it beyond any doubt.

In general, we must be wary when confronting an issue in which uncertainty clouds the path to finding the sure ruling; we should err on the side of caution in such affairs. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, “Leave what puts you in doubt in favor of what does not” (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*), cautioning Muslims of the doubtful. From another ḥadīth, we learn a great wisdom behind this cautiousness that every Muslim ought to exhibit: “What is lawful is clear, and what is unlawful is clear. And in between the two are doubtful matters [whose rulings] many people do not know. He who guards against the doubtful safeguards his religion and honor, and he who falls into the doubtful falls into the unlawful, just as a shepherd who grazes his flock around a preserve will likely soon graze them in it. Indeed, every king has a preserve, and the preserve of Allāh are the things he has declared unlawful” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*). Therefore, abstaining from something whose permissibility cannot be established is, with little or no exception, the best path to take.

### Muslims Must Demand Better

It is necessary for Muslims to bear a sense of responsibility to their faith and accountability before Allāh by demanding better of themselves and not settling with unlawful and doubtful foods. The Prophet ﷺ said, “A body that has been nourished by the unlawful will not enter Paradise” (*Shu'ab al-Īmān*). This is, therefore, a serious issue for Muslims.

Countries such as Zimbabwe, where the Muslims have been very particular about the *ḥalāl*-meat issue since they first migrated to the country, have made great progress in meat production. Beef from Zimbabwe is exported to the UK and other countries. On my visit to Zimbabwe, I was told by a member of the Council of Muslim Theologians (Jamiatul Ulama) that it had become a requirement in the Zimbabwe meat industry that all animals be slaughtered according to Islamic rites.

The concept of supply and demand should be kept in mind: if there is a demand, there will be a supply. Allāh willing, if there is a demand for an extensive range of *ḥalāl* meat products in the US and other lands where Muslims compose a minority of the population, a servant of Allāh will rise to satisfy that demand. As it has happened so far, *ḥalāl*-meat stores have had to shut down for lack of patronage from local Muslims, who prefer to purchase from their local supermarkets under the flimsy pretext that we have just discussed.

Returning to the popular terminology we introduced in the beginning, any meat that can be considered truly *ḥalāl*—that is, lawful for a Muslim to consume—is not just that it be cow meat or

chicken meat or something other than pork, but that the meat be what is now in the US dubbed *zabiha*, which means, albeit inaccurately, that all the requirements of Islamic slaughter be fulfilled.

It is, furthermore, unfair, unreasonable, and childish to label the notion of *zabiha* and all the requirements it today represents as a concoction of Indo-Pakistani culture, which is the current attitude for many Muslims in the US. Granted, the fault for the misuse of this term and the consequent confusion of those like the British brother we met earlier, arguably lies with this group. But the requirements underlying it are anything but Indo-Pakistani. If we go to Syria, Turkey, Yemen, Malaysia, and West Africa, where Muslims are decidedly not Indian or Pakistani, we see these same laws upheld by Muslims who take lawful meat consumption seriously. Eating *zabiha*—or, we should say, *ḥalāl*—meat is the duty of every Muslim, period.

### Our Responsibility

What, therefore, is the responsibility of Muslims living in a country like the US, where there is great confusion regarding the meat issue? What is one to do when invited to eat with friends and family who may not be very particular about their eating habits or may follow another opinion? Is one allowed to even ask of the source of their meat?

It is necessary for Muslims to ensure that what they eat is lawful. They therefore have to do their best to ascertain that the meat served in a home or bought in a store has come from a properly slaughtered animal.

Many raise the good point that excessively doubting the meat another Muslim sells or serves at home is a display of petulance that does not befit a Muslim and that inspires deep mistrust among Muslims. We must indeed think well of Muslims and give them the benefit of the doubt. But this does not mean that Muslims should cross into the territory of imprudence and naïveté. If ignorance and confusion about some matter of Islam are the prevailing conditions in a community of Muslims, ought we not tread carefully and act with a sense of caution, lest we be taken into doing something wrong by someone ill-informed? In the matter of slaughtered meat in particular, inquiry into the source of some meat is uncalled-for if we know, either with complete certainty or overwhelmingly convincing evidence, that a particular community or region or nation of Muslims follows the rules of animal slaughter laid down by Islamic law. But when the state of Muslims is such that there is sheer ignorance about or great laxity in adhering to such laws; when a community can't figure out what it means to be *ḥalāl* and what it means to be *zabiha* (or what these words even mean in themselves); and when the number of opinions about what makes meat lawful is as great as the number of those who opine; how can we so readily accept that the meat Muslims offer us is doubtlessly lawful? To be fair, this is not to attack the intentions of Muslims. Whenever we can, we must always give Muslims the benefit of the doubt in that they are well-meaning and do not *try* to serve unlawful meat to their brothers in Islam. And, admittedly, there remains yet an immense dearth of sources of Islamic knowledge, in the form of scholars or books written by scholars, to educate the Muslims about such matters. Nevertheless, until Muslims become more conscious about the Islamic rulings on the weighty matter of lawful meats, we must be cautious and prepared to inquire kindly of our Muslim brothers as to where their meat comes from.

In opposition to this claim, some bring forth the following verse of the Qur'ān: "O you who believe, do not ask about things that, if revealed to you, may cause you trouble" (Qur'ān 5:101). To quote this verse in this context, however, betokens a deep misunderstanding of its intent. This verse was revealed when some companions asked questions whose answers would, at best, have done them no good and, at worse, have caused them personal grief. The commentaries of Qur'ān cite incidents where they asked personal questions bearing little importance to others, and they sometimes heavily burdened Allāh's

Messenger ﷺ with a large number of such inquiries. But the source of the food we consume, in a time when few are well-informed of Islamic dietary laws, is of no little importance in the life of a Muslim. To know that food from a doubtful source is unlawful would in fact do him much good. This verse, therefore, is not a suitable argument against inquiring into the food other Muslims present to us.

It is necessary that a Muslim do his best to ensure—by asking if necessary but without falling prey to excessive doubt—that the meat he is offered is truly *ḥalāl*, in the correct sense of the word. It is not simply enough to say *Bismillāh* on a piece of meat to make it lawful. The narration often quoted in this vein pertains, as many scholars have explained, to a time when the meat was predominantly known to be slaughtered correctly. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ was showing them that, in such a situation, it is not necessary to inquire into the matter, but that one should maintain a positive opinion about the one offering the meat. As for the instruction to “mention the name of Allāh and eat,” it does not, as worded in the narration, conclusively imply that mentioning His name before eating makes unlawfully slaughtered meat lawful. When does a Muslim ever eat that he should not recite the name of Allāh before doing so?

On a practical level, it is sometimes difficult to determine how reliable a meat source is, and equally difficult to summon the courage and tact necessary to ask a Muslim host where his meat is from without being insulting. Here are some ways to go about overcoming these hurdles.

#### What to Do When Invited for a Meal

When doubtful or unsure about a person’s source of meat, one can take the following steps:

1. If possible, it is usually best to go directly to the host at the time of receiving the invitation or close thereafter (but well before the date of invitation), and politely inform him or her, without being judgmental about his or her practices, that you have some strict dietary limitations regarding meat. Inform them of butchers you trust. If the meat does not come from these sources, and the host is not willing or able to obtain meat from these certified stores, let him know that meat is not a necessary part of the meal for you and that you would be perfectly satisfied with alternate options, such as vegetable and fish dishes. Let them feel that you are eager to accept their kind invitation and enjoy their company, and that, for you at least, the importance of the gathering is in being together, not the type and variety of food served.
2. If it is difficult to approach the host, perhaps because one is not on intimate enough terms with him, then ask in an appropriate manner someone who may know where the host buys his meat. As much as possible, this should be done in an indirect and subtle manner, so as not to raise too much suspicion or throw the matter out of proportion.
3. Volunteer to purchase the meat for the host, and buy it from your trusted source. In the US in particular, many people are particular about what they eat and strictly adhere to certain self-imposed dietary restrictions, so many hosts are quite accommodating. For example, some people are on a low-carb diet, some are vegetarian, some are lactose intolerant, some allergic to nuts, and many hosts are willing to go out of their way to serve a cuisine that suits the needs of their guests.

#### Finding a *Ḥalāl* Meat Store or Restaurant

The matter of *ḥalāl* meat is further confounded by finding a meat market or restaurant that offers truly *ḥalāl* products. Incidents of dishonesty in some of these establishments, especially in major US cities,

have most unfortunately cast doubt on whether they serve what they claim to. Some methods for finding the right store are as follows:

1. Make an earnest effort to ask around and see if some reliable and pious people in the community can provide some verification about a particular meat supplier or store or restaurant. Ask the scholars of the area, who are careful about what they eat, where they purchase their meat.
2. Speak to the store owner. Normally, they are quite open to revealing their suppliers, policies, etc. And why should they not be, if they are not doing anything wrong? Resistance to answer these reasonable questions is a good way of gauging the honesty of a store that claims to sell lawful meat. Ask them who their suppliers are, and then ask reliable scholars in the area for verification regarding the suppliers. Unfortunately, not all store owners are forthright; some have even been found to purchase a small amount of meat from a reliable source to gain certification and then stock a large amount from unreliable or completely non-*halāl* meat suppliers.
3. Sometimes there are organizations that certify meat providers. Ask reliable scholars in the area if these organizations' certifications are trustworthy.
4. Sometimes large companies that are well established and can provide their own certification in writing (for instance, that all their meat is from hand-slaughtered animals) may be trusted. However, beware of vague statements like "slaughtered according to Islamic rites," as they could be following some unreliable, unscholarly sources, or "mechanically separated chicken," which in many cases means machine-slaughtered, as opposed to hand-slaughtered, chicken.
5. If possible, team up with a few others and find a farm or abattoir willing to sell you a cow, goat, lamb, or other animal that you may slaughter yourself. Meat stores sometimes provide the cutting service of the meat for a very nominal charge.

It is not unclear that this issue is difficult to grapple with, but, as is the case with such issues, it is also a very serious one. These pieces of advice are not exhaustive and simply cannot cover the effectively infinite number of difficult scenarios one might face. The easiest method to follow is probably to ask a reliable scholar, preferably in the area, to provide some guidance for one's specific situation and, if possible, to inform you of someone trustworthy. If a person has tried their utmost in this regard, and the meat still turns out to be not what is claimed, the sin rests on the shoulders of the one who is deceitful. Allāh is forgiving but expects that His slaves put in their share of toil. As long as we are not complacent with making little or no effort, Allāh will, we always hope and pray, overlook failures that are beyond our ability to avoid.

### The Past

If someone has the misfortune of having consumed unlawful meat in the past, whether because he or she simply did not know the importance of the matter or did not have a proper understanding of what meat truly qualifies as lawful, there comes to mind the agonizing question, do I really have to stop eating such meat? In a word, yes. But, like so many things, the matter is not that simple. Learning that one, having thought for a long that he has been doing nothing wrong, has in fact been doing something against Allāh's commands, can be a very shocking discovery that creates despair in the heart. It is not surprising or unreasonable that a sincere Muslim feel as if he or she can't turn back or be forgiven for having done something wrong for such a long time. But those who have this feeling should take comfort in that they are one of a large club of individuals who have this very same problem—which is to say, all of mankind.

There is no human being who cannot root around in his bygone days and find some bugaboo, of whatever kind, that haunts his life, some transgression against Allāh that he feels can never be forgiven.

But anyone can take consolation and smooth out the matter by remembering the vast and incomparable mercy of Allāh, so oft-mentioned in the Qur’ān, as in the following verse: “Say, O my slaves who have committed [sins in great] excess against their souls, never despair of the mercy of Allāh! For, indeed, Allāh forgives sins, one and all. Indeed, He is the All-Forgiving, the Mercy-Giving. So turn back often to your Lord, and submit yourselves to Him” (Qur’ān 39:53–54). One must not then let Satan trick him into thinking that he has irreversibly crossed the point of no return; the only one who can shut the door of mercy on an individual is the individual himself, for so long as one seeks the forgiveness of Allāh, Allāh will be there to listen to his plea. Those who have made this mistake in the past can rectify it and let their former errors, with the mercy of Allāh, vanish with the days that have passed. One must, therefore, repent to Allāh Most High, feel remorse over his actions, and resolve never to revert to them in the future.

And Allāh Almighty knows best.

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