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Halal foodstuffs: Halal market – religious background – certification

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Religious or ideologically-driven requirements for choosing food or methods of food production are nothing new. However, the last few years have seen significant global movements in the market segments affected – this applies, in particular, to foods certified as halal and kosher, and organic and vegetarian products.

The question as to what may be eaten and drunk in everyday life is given special significance in almost every culture and religion. The area of food and drink is also subject to certain rules and regulations in Islam. The term 'halal' describes food that Muslims are allowed to eat and drink according to their religion.

Even though halal foods are nothing new, they are gaining in importance by the day on a global level. This is largely down to the enormous number of Muslims in general, significant changes to the global market, and the increasing focus on predominantly Muslim countries as new 'sales markets'.

The spread of Islam

Reliable statistics on religious adherence are difficult to come by, but it is currently estimated that approximately one quarter of the world's population adhere to the Islamic faith, which means that there are some 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide [1]. Contrary to the widespread belief that these people principally live in the Middle East, the countries with the largest Muslim populations are actually in South and South East Asia. These are, in decreasing order of size: Indonesia (202 million), Pakistan (174 million), India (161 million), Bangladesh (145 million), Egypt (79 million), Nigeria (78 million), Iran (74 million) and Turkey (74 million) [7]. Of the 51.4 million Muslims in Europe [3], some 4.3 million live in Germany [11]. This means that, after Russia, Germany is home to the highest number of Muslims in Europe and is ahead of France. Although there has been a clear slowdown in the annual increase in the number of Muslims worldwide, they still represent the fastest growing demographic group with an annual growth rate of some 1.84 per cent [3].

The halal market

As well as the large number of Muslims, the second driving force behind the growth of the halal market is attributed to fundamental changes within the global market. The overriding factor here is that a number of Muslim countries, and hence Islam in its entirety, are gaining in confidence, influence and economic power because they are experiencing stronger rates of GDP growth than their western counterparts.

Economic developments like the ones we are seeing in these countries normally bring about profound social changes, most notably a growing rural exodus with a consequent increase in urbanisation. This is resulting in changes to living conditions and consumer habits. As regards foodstuffs, this means in particular that demand for processed food and drink is growing massively, with other changes in traditional taste preferences also becoming apparent. Even modern phenomena such as ready-to-eat products, fast food, takeaways, and health and wellbeing trends are putting in an appearance in these markets and are generating a growing need for appropriate products that have to be compatible with Muslim food requirements. In the absence of local production facilities, lucrative export markets are opening up in product categories such as these.

The *Ummah*, that is, the religious community of all Muslims, is not a homogeneous global market but is instead fragmented – most notably by the following features: varying interpretations of what is meant by the term halal, huge differences in disposable income in the various countries, differing attitudes, religiosity and ethnic identity.

The global food market was valued at US$ 3,992.2 billion in 2009, of which US$ 634.5 billion, i.e. approximately 15.9 per cent was accounted for by halal products. The overall market in halal products rose even further to US$ 651.5 billion in 2010, of which US$ 67 billion was attributable to Europe [1]. Germany's halal market is currently stated to be worth approximately € 5 billion.

Religious background

Islam is a monotheistic religion based on divine revelations to the Prophet Muhammad and considers itself to be the *din al-fitrah*, i.e. the religion already present in all men as part of nature. It offers detailed support and guidance to its followers, namely Muslims, in the form of required and prohibited elements of *Shari´ah*: the moral code and religious law of Islam.

The immutable basis of Islam and of *Shari'ah* is the Qur'an: a collection of surahs composed of verses, which is the holy book of Islam. Muslims consider it to be the verbatim word of God and as such, its contents are not debatable and must be accepted as religious truths. Another important source in addition to the Qur'an is *Sunnah*: a collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad designated as the Hadith, and traditions, which refer back to that which the Prophet did (*Sunnatu´l-Fi´l*), that which the Prophet said should be practised (*Sunnatu´l-Qaul*) and that which was done and said in the Prophet's presence and which he did not forbid (*Sunnatu´l-Taqrir*) [5].

For questions that cannot be resolved by the Qur'an or Sunnah, two other sources can be consulted: the first is *Al-Ijma'*, namely the consensus of the *ummah* and, in particular, the *ulema*, the community of all former and current Islamic scholars. The second source that can be brought into play is *Al-Qiyas*, the process of deductive analogy using the existing deposit of faith. Whilst the fundamental principles of Islam remain inalterable, *Shari´ah* is, and has been, interpreted by different groups of Muslim scholars [8].

Halal or haram

Regarding the question of what is permitted or forbidden in Islam, it is important to make a distinction between the following terms:

- **Al-halal** describes what is lawful, what is permitted, with no restrictions whatsoever, and what has been allowed by the law-giver, namely Allah. 'Halal' implies that the product concerned is also ritually pure, i.e. is *tahir* (the opposite is *najis* = unclean).
- **Al-haram** on the other hand means what is unlawful, what the law-giver has absolutely forbidden. A person nevertheless engaging in forbidden practices will incur the punishment of Allah in the afterlife and maybe also the punishment of the law in this life.
- **Al-makruh** describes what is taboo, detestable, something that the law-giver rejects, but not absolutely. A person engaging in a practice that is makruh will not be punished for it, but if he deliberately refrains from doing it, he will be rewarded. If an act that is makruh is carried out to excess, this results in haram.
- **Mashbooh** ultimately means 'dubious' or 'questionable' and is used when a clear decision cannot be made as to whether something is halal or haram. The term is often used in connection with ingredients and food additives if, for example, the origin or method of production are not clear.

It is incumbent solely upon the Creator to forbid something. Muslims believe that God is the sole creator of the world and of humanity. *He* alone created all things, all things belong to *Him* alone and all things shall return to *Him* alone. The bounty of creation was given over to man to enjoy and as God's representative (*Khalifa*), he should preserve it sensibly. Everything created by God and the benefits that can be derived from these are intended for mankind as a matter of principle and are thus permitted, i.e. halal. Only those things that have been forbidden by the law-giver, as evidenced by an indubitable and clear *nass*, i.e. a verse in the Qur'an or a clear Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, are haram [2].

The clear message from the Qur'an is that the use of both plants and animals for food is permitted in principle according to Islamic law. In practice, however, two fundamental conditions must be observed. Firstly, it is only permissible to eat food that is healthy and beneficial to man. Secondly, a responsibility for the bounty of creation that has been provided is central to every action that is taken, which rules out excessive or irresponsible use of the earth's resources.

Foods of animal origin

The only edible things that are unambiguously classified as haram in the Qur'an concern the group of foodstuffs derived from land animals. The following are forbidden: animals that are already dead before slaughter, blood, pork, animals slaughtered in the name of anyone other than Allah, animals that have been suffocated, beaten to death, fallen to their death, gored to death or killed by a wild animal, unless they can be reached and slaughtered when still alive.

Wild animals with fangs, birds of prey, animals with no ears, and poisonous animals are unanimously declared by all Imams as unclean, although not specified in the Qur'an, and therefore prohibited for consumption by Muslims. All of these animals are *makruh* but not *haram*.

There is some uncertainty with regard to animals that can be reared as working animals and for meat, i.e. horses, mules and donkeys. There is however a tendency towards allowing them.

Birds that do not use their claws to hold their prey are definitely halal, such as chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, pigeons, partridges, quails, sparrows and ostriches.

There are differences of opinion with regard to animals that come from the water, although no differentiation is made between saltwater and freshwater species. Some Muslims accept only fish with scales as halal.

Insects are generally regarded as impure in Islam. The only exception is locusts, which are widely considered halal. Products derived from insects are evaluated differently. Honey, for example, is particularly recommended in the Qur'an, whereas opinions are divided on products such as carmine (cochineal).

Eggs and milk from clean animals are definitely halal. Rules forbidding the combined use of milk and meat are unknown in Islam.

Ritual slaughter

Meat that is to be used for human consumption is only halal if the animals have been ritually slaughtered according to the halal slaughter requirements. There is no specific passage in the Qur'an from which this instruction can be explicitly derived, but its necessity can be inferred from the prohibited use of carrion, blood, or animals that have been dedicated to deities other than Allah. The only exceptions are animals that are shot on a hunt or caught by a hunting animal.

The prescribed manner for carrying out a ritual slaughter, as recorded in a Sunnah, involves the severing of the animal's oesophagus, trachea, jugular vein and carotid arteries in a single cut from a sharp knife, whilst invoking Allah by name. An essential requirement for this process is that the animal is still alive at the time of its slaughter, so that it bleeds out swiftly and as completely as possible. Other provisions to be adhered to most notably include instructions aimed at minimizing the animal's suffering before and during the slaughter process [4].

Pronouncing the name of Allah at the slaughter of each individual animal has deep significance, which is why the practice in some large slaughterhouses of carrying out the pronouncement using an audio tape is subject to great criticism and the meat is considered haram. Just like man himself, animals are the creation of God, whose lives can only be taken with His permission, that is, in His name.

There are constant discussions, particularly in the non-Islamic developed countries of the western world, as to whether the ritual slaughter of animals is cruel and, this being the case, whether it can be brought in line with the animal welfare provisions of the respective country.

Recent advances in slaughter technology have brought about a reappraisal of the ritual slaughter of animals. The Islamic ritual calls for animals to show signs of life at the time of slaughter. Today, numerous authorities recognise that this requirement is clearly met if electric stunning is correctly carried out on animals – if you wait a short time, a stunned animal will get up again and run around as if nothing happened.

Foods of vegetable origin

There are no specific prohibitions with regard to vegetable-based foodstuffs and they are, generally speaking, considered halal. There can be exceptions, however, as the aforementioned conditions can also apply here. For example, poisonous plants or plants that can induce a state of intoxication are strictly forbidden.

In future, the issue of 'what is good for people' may well become increasingly significant not only for toxicologists, food manufacturers and legislators, but also for Islamic theologians. Modern science – a consequence of man's capacity for knowledge, granted to him by the grace of Allah – is throwing up questions relating to our food, which cannot simply be ignored.

In regard to substances in food which are – or could be – harmful to people and where legislators have already taken preventive action to protect health (e.g. pesticides, contaminants), the situation is clear. If the legally prescribed limits of these substances are exceeded in a foodstuff, it is considered not fit for consumption, is no longer deemed harmless to health and is therefore haram. The requirements of the Qur'an are consistent with those of food hygiene.

In view of today's knowledge about the natural composition of raw plant materials, it is questionable whether a long tradition of using an ingredient can be deemed sufficient justification for its continued use. Take, for example, the discussions on substances found in various spices that exhibit a pathogenic, e.g. carcinogenic, potential in their isolated form (e.g. methyl eugenol and methyl chavicol [10]). There is a need here for discussions that are not only of a scientific nature, but deal instead with philosophical (ethical) and theological concerns.

Alcohol

Of all the foodstuffs that are forbidden for Muslims, alcohol is the one that repeatedly prompts debate – although the ban on alcohol for Muslims relates specifically to ethanol.

Studying the Qur'an shows that alcohol is not categorically prohibited from the outset, but in three stages that become increasingly emphatic. Al-Qaradawi [1] sees this gradual process, which is explained and justified – unlike the prohibition of carrion, pork, blood and animals that are not ritually slaughtered – as a wise form of education. The fact that the consumption of alcohol might impair the mind, thus blocking the way to God in thought and prayer, should be reason enough for a believer to avoid alcohol. Devout Muslims interpret 'avoid' to the letter and try to refrain from any contact with alcohol. Other Muslims interpret the grounds for prohibition as meaning that the consumption of alcohol is allowed to an extent where it does not result in an impairment of their judgement. This interpretation however contradicts a Sunnah according to which Muhammad said "Whatever intoxicates in a greater quantity is also unlawful in its smaller quantity" [9].

This discussion is, to all intents and purposes, far too simplistic as it refers to the word *khamr* in the Qur'an, which in modern-day language equates to 'wine', or in the very strictest sense 'wine from grapes'. For a true understanding of the Qur'an, it is necessary to refer back to the High Arabic stem of the word, namely *khamará*, which is comparable to 'intoxicate the head' or 'lose the mind'. It can be inferred from this that the 5th Surah, Verse 91 of the Qur'an not only bans the consumption of alcohol but also of all intoxicating foodstuffs and other intoxicating substances, in particular, natural and synthetic narcotics.

For food manufacturers, these provisions mean that the use or inclusion of alcohol in food recipes should be avoided in any form. This prohibition applies also to the use of flavourings or oleoresins in which alcohol, i.e. ethyl alcohol, has been used as a solvent. Ethanol is also prohibited as a component in cleaning products and disinfectants, although another alcohol (e.g. isopropanol) can easily be used in the manufacture of these products.

Origin of the dietary laws

The search for the primal origin and background for the multiplicity of dietary laws that exist in various religions and world views is not a recent development. In particular, the prohibition on the consumption of carrion, pork and blood and numerous other passages in the Qur'an and Sunnah raise doubts over and over again as to the original religious nature of the dietary regulations.

From a medical and food hygiene perspective, these prohibitions can be understood entirely in terms of hygiene measures that are based on the experiences and requirements of ancient populations, particularly those in warm countries. Even if these reflections are accurate in essence, there is a broad consensus that the various dietary laws have, in the end, predominantly religious backgrounds. According to the Islamic interpretation, there is no question that – in common with other scientific knowledge – these aspects can, with hindsight, help explain the instructions ordained through divine wisdom for the good of mankind and also act as proof of the greatness of God, but they have never been a necessary precondition for the formulation of these instructions.

In theological terms, the dietary laws are frequently interpreted such that adherence to them shows that human actions should be carried out according to their lawfulness. The dietary laws in the Qur'an should thus not be understood merely from a physical health viewpoint, but much more from a moral and spiritual perspective. What is forbidden in the Qur'an is forbidden because it is harmful to purity, to morality and to belief. Everything that causes no harm to this is permitted. The use of the term 'halal' i.e. 'pure' in the Qur'an for permitted foods, speaks simultaneously to believers' sense of cleanliness and moral sensitivities. Material and spiritual hygiene, the everyday and the transcendent: concepts that are coupled together in a union that promotes people's corporeal as well as their spiritual wellbeing.

Production of halal products

Whilst many questions relating to the production of halal products can be easily answered – the clear ban, for example, on consuming meat from pigs or any type of product derived from pigs – decisions on other issues require intensive discussions on the part of religious scholars.

Due to this complexity, it is not possible to discuss all the issues relating to halal production in detail here, although the most important aspects have been summarised below:

- Only those raw materials, ingredients and additives that are halal may be used. When assessing whether something is halal or not, the methods and conditions of production, sometimes also the raw ingredients used, have to be considered. Meat or animal products may only be used, for example, if the animals concerned have been ritually slaughtered.
- No materials or equipment that are najis, i.e. ritually unclean, may be used.
- Production and working materials may not be najis prior to the start of production and must, if necessary, first be brought into a ritually pure state, which can be achieved by cleaning them with water between one and three times.
- During the entire production process, care must be taken to ensure that there is no contamination with substances/objects that are haram or najis.

Halal certification

Whether or not a business should set up halal production facilities is a strategic question that should be decided by the management, as it can lead to far-reaching consequences for the firm's corporate processes. You have to be either completely halal or not at all.

If the conditions for halal production already exist within a business and can be adhered to, then this can be certified by the relevant certification bodies and certification companies. In view of the fact that there are differing interpretations of what is meant by halal, no standard halal certificate exists as yet. For this reason, when deciding with whom to cooperate on the certification, consideration should be given to the acceptability of the certificate in question. If the business wishes to operate internationally, then it should choose a certification body or certification company that is accepted, at least, by JAKIM (Halal Malaysia) or MUI (Indonesian Council of Ulema).

Closing remarks

Efforts to develop halal certificates into a general food standard can be observed on an international level. As Muslims act in a manner that is *ihsan*, i.e. every action should be carried out in the perfect manner, thus applying quality to all things, a halal certification must, in principle, cover the entire production process, from the field to the finished product, including transportation, sale and financing. Ultimately, this means that aspects such as organic production, fair trade, animal welfare and corporate social responsibility would also have to be considered as part of the halal certification process. It is hardly surprising, in view of this, that some customers today already buy halal-certified products even though they are not Muslims. One reason for this is that some consumers are convinced that the strict religious regulations result in a greater degree of food safety than that guaranteed by government requirements and controls.

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