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DIVINE LAW, ETHICS, AND HUMAN NATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANIMAL SLAUGHTER IN ISLAM AND HINDUISM

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DIVINE LAW, ETHICS, AND HUMAN NATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANIMAL SLAUGHTER IN ISLAM AND HINDUISM

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ABSTRACT:

The issue of slaughtering animals to eat has been the subject of religious, ethical and scientific argument over the centuries. In this paper, the authors will analyze the Islamic and Hindu views on the allowability of slaughtering animals as a source of food to people. The eating of meat has been explicitly allowed in Islam under certain conditions established by God whereas Hinduism has a more mixed and diverse perspective: some of the texts allow meat to be eaten under specific conditions and the rest support vegetarianism. This article compares the two traditions by comparing Quranic verses, the literature of the Hindu religion including the Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and Vedas. Logical arguments, based on human biology, nutrition science, and the philosophical debate of Ahimsa, such as whether plants can suffer pain, are also included in the study. The results indicate that the two religions have subtle stands and a simplistic way of depicting them as either entirely permissive or entirely restrictive is not true.

KEYWORDS: Animal Slaughter, Halal, Islam, Hinduism, Comparative Religion, Hindu Scriptures, Quran, Hadith, Vegetarianism, Ahimsa, Food Ethics, Nutrition, Human Biology

1. Introduction

Food is not just a question of material survival. The choice of food and the manner in which it is cooked has profound spiritual, ethical and cultural significance in most great religions. Islam and Hinduism are perhaps two of the most talked about religions in the world as far as the topic of slaughtering animals to obtain food is concerned. Muslims have a very elaborate and god-inspired code of rules concerning the way that an animal should be slaughtered, and the Hindu tradition is all too often, and quite inaccurately, supposed to be purely vegetarian. The truth, as the scriptures themselves show, is much more complex and historically laden.

One of the main questions that come to mind in both traditions is as follows: Is it ethically and religiously right to kill an animal in order to feed human beings? The response to this question is not just different between Islam and Hinduism, but also within the same tradition, depending on the text, school of thought, or period in history one is looking at.

The purpose of this article is to investigate both of these traditions fairly and comprehensively, basing the comparison on their own original scripture, and their genuine teachings. It is not to proclaim either of these traditions as better than the other, but rather to explain each in its own right and then find out where these traditions meet, where they diverge, and where the controversy between them is not yet resolved. A variety of logical and scientific arguments, which assist in explaining why both traditions came to the standpoints that they did, are also discussed in the study, such as the biological design of the human organism, the nutritional strength of the meat, and the philosophical impossibility of the idea of Ahimsa when it is applied to all living beings, even plants.

The study is based on the Holy Quran, the Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim collections of Hadith, and Hindu texts: Rigveda, Manusmriti, and the

Mahabharata. There has also been inclusion of scientific evidence concerning Islamic method of slaughter and nutritional foundation of meat consumption to prove that religious sanction and the current knowledge are not in opposition.

2. The Islamic View on Slaughtering of animals

2.1 The Principle of Permissibility (Halal) of the Quran

The consumption of meat is not only permissible in Islam, but it is a tradition dating back to the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) and it is an issue that has been explicitly covered in the Holy Quran in various occasions. The permission is not vague or hidden, it is clearly and directly stated.

Allah says in Surah Al-Maidah, Chapter 5, Verse 1:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَوْفُوا بِالْعُقُودِ أُحِلَّتْ لَكُمْ بَهِيمَةُ الْأَنْعَامِ¹

"Eat of the four-footed animals which have been made lawful for you."

It is one of the most explicit statements of permission to eat meat in the whole of the Quran, and specifically mentions four-footed animals as the category of lawful food.

In the Surah of An-Nahl, Chapter 16, Verse 5, Allah adds on:

وَالْأَنْعَامَ خَلَقَهَا لَكُمْ فِيهَا دِفْءٌ وَمَنَافِعُ وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ²

And the cattle That He hath made unto you; in them is heat
And [many] things of good, And out of them hast thou meat.

¹ *Al-Qur'ān*, 5:1.

² *Al-Qur'ān*, 16:5.

This verse links the making of cattle with the direct benefit of man - their eating as well as their use and reveals that even the structure of creation itself justifies this concession.

In Chapter 23, Verse 21, Surah Al-Mu'minun, Allah tells us:

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَنْعَامِ لَعِبْرَةً ۖ نُسْقِيكُمْ مِمَّا فِي بُطُونِهَا وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ
كَثِيرَةٌ وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ³

“And, indeed, to you in livestock is a lesson, we bring you drink of what is in their bellies, and in them are many benefits, and of them you eat.”

The passage stresses the idea that animals were made to benefit people in several aspects and consuming their flesh is one of the most important of them.

It should be mentioned that Islam does not oblige the meat-consumption.

And as Allah says, Chapter 2, Verse 168 in Surah Al-Baqarah:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا⁴

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good.”

A Muslim will still be a good Muslim and still be able to have full faith by consuming only vegetarian food. The right to consume meat is just that, a right, not a duty. But, when Allah Himself gives this permission, there is no religious justification to deny or dismiss it.

Surah Al-Maidah, Chapter 5, Verse 3 also spells out what is not allowed in the Quran:

³ *Al-Qur'ān*, 23:21.

⁴ *Al-Qur'ān*, 2:168.

حُرِّمَتْ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةُ وَالِدَمُّ وَلَحْمُ الْخِنزِيرِ وَمَا أُهِلَّ لِغَيْرِ اللَّهِ بِهِ⁵

“It is forbidden to you: dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, that which is slaughtered on [the name of] other than Allah.”

The Quran has provided what is prohibited and by doing so, it has self-affirmed that everything that is properly slaughtered is in the category of what is allowed.

2.2 Islamic Slaughter (Dhabihah)

Islam does not simply allow the slaughtering of animals but a certain and humane and spiritually oriented procedure called Dhabihah is prescribed. The slaughtering of the animal should be alive and healthy. Allah before making the cut, the slaughterer must recite the name of Allah. A sharp blade must be used, and the incision should be carried out quickly across the throat, damaging the windpipe, the foodpipe and the two jugular veins together. Before the meat is eaten, the body must be emptied of all the blood. The Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْإِحْسَانَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ.....⁶

“Allah has decreed expertise in everything, so kill, kill well; and slaughter, slaughter well. Let every one of thee sharpen his blade, and spare pain to the animal he slaughters.”

⁵ *Al-Qur'ān*, 5:3.

⁶ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Ḍaḥāyā, Hadith no. 1955.

This Hadith clarifies that Islam is very much concerned about the animal suffering to the end of its life. The sharpening of the blade is no mere practical suggestion, but rather a moral teaching.

In a different narration, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

نَهَى النَّبِيُّ ﷺ أَنْ يُتَّخَذَ شَيْءٌ فِيهِ الرُّوحُ غَرَضًا⁷

"Do not make anything with a living soul as a target."

This Hadith further supports the fact that Islam strictly prohibits cruelty and entertainment of animals by harming them.

2.3. Scientific evidence on Islamic Slaughter and Meat eating

The contemporary science has provided significant reinforcement to the Islamic authorization to consume meat, and even the Dhabihah technique. These are some of the points that should be looked upon, as they display that divine guidance and scientific reasoning lead to the same conclusions in different ways.

To begin with, the nutritional value of meat: to be healthy, the human body needs twenty-three amino acids. Eight of these are referred to as essential amino acids - that is, the human body cannot synthesize them independently, but has to get them in the diet. Interestingly, all the eight vital amino acids are present only in flesh food. None of the vegetable or plant foods includes all eight essential amino acids in the necessary proportions. This renders meat to be nutritionally special and not entirely substitutable by a strictly vegetarian diet. Scientifically, the fact that Islam allows people to eat meat is exactly what is required by the human body biologically.

⁷ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Ṣayd, Hadith no. 5194.

Second, as to the construction of the human body itself: when you consider the teeth of the herbivorous animals, the cows, goats, and sheep, their teeth are flat, and they are only adapted to chewing plants and grass. They lack and are not in need of canine teeth. The carnivorous animals like lion, tiger and leopard, however, possess sharp and pointed canine teeth, and these teeth are actually intended to tearing flesh. When one observes the teeth of human beings, there are flat teeth and pointed canine teeth that co-exist. Had Allah planned that human beings should only consume vegetables then why should we give humans canine teeth in the first place? Having them in the human mouth itself is a biological pointer that humans are made to ingest plant and animal food.

Third, this conclusion is supported by the digestive system of the human being. The intestinal system of the herbivorous animal is constructed such that it only digests plant foods whereas the digestive system of the carnivorous animal can only digest meat. Human digestive system, i.e. having a small and a long intestine of a certain length can digest plant food as well as meat. This dual capacity did not come about by accident. It displays a divine plan that compiles both kinds of food.

Fourth, on the Islamic slaughter procedure: a research carried out at Hannover University, Germany, by Dr. Schultz, and Dr. Hazim established that the Dhabihah process does not inflict much pain on the animal within the initial few seconds of the cut as the animal loses consciousness almost immediately due to the loss of blood to the brain. Moreover, full emptying of the carcass implies that the meat will have much fewer bacteria and therefore will be cleaner and healthier to be eaten by humans, which is also in line with the Quranic directive:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا⁸

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good.”

3. Hindu View on slaughter of animals

3.1 The Stereotype of Hinduism and Meat

There is a general belief, both among Hindus and non-Hindus that Hinduism is a purely vegetarian religion and that meat consumption has never been permitted to all Hindus. This supposition, is historically and scripturally false. Although vegetarianism has become an overpowering ethical ideal of the contemporary Hindu practice, mostly under the impact of the idea of Ahimsa or non-violence, the ancient Hindu texts show a completely different image. The practice of meat-eating was widespread during the Vedic era, animal sacrifice was a regular practice during the religious life and some of the most revered sages and forefathers in Hindu culture were known to have eaten meat, even beef.

3.2 Evidence from the Manusmriti

Manusmriti is one of the most authoritative ancient Hindu legal texts, but it directly answers the question of meat consumption in a manner that may shock many modern Hindus.

Manusmriti, Chapter 5, Verse 30 says:

⁸ *Al-Qur'ān*, 2:168.

"The Almighty God has created some animals to eat and some animals to be eaten. If you eat the animals that have been created to be eaten, then it is not a sin." ⁹

This verse provides a divine structure regarding the acceptability of consuming some animals - a structure that is quite similar to the Islamic interpretation that Allah created certain animals to be consumed by people.

Chapter 5, Verse 31 of the Manusmriti goes a step further to state:

"Almighty God created some animals for the purpose of sacrifice. Killing them for sacrifice is not a sin." ¹⁰

This verse justifies the sacrificial killing of animals as a prescribed divine act and not a sin.

Verse 40 of Chapter 5 of the Manusmriti goes further to say:

"Killing sacrificial animals for the purpose of sacrifice is permitted. It is the law of God."¹¹

The direct line it is the law of god is especially notable. It demonstrates that the ancient Hindu law tradition did not consider animal slaughter as an invention of man and a convenience of culture, but an ordination of God, similar to the Islamic interpretation of Dhabihah.

But the Manusmriti too has its repercussion-voice. Chapter 5, Verse 49 advises against taking meat:

⁹ *Manusmriti*, 5:30.

¹⁰ *Manusmriti*, 5:31.

¹¹ *Manusmriti*, 5:40.

"Having considered the origin of flesh food and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let him entirely abstain from eating flesh."¹²

This two-sidedness, of permitting meat in ritual, and of urging personal abstinence, is the internal conflict which has characterized Hindu discussion of this subject throughout centuries.

3.3 Evidence from the Mahabharata

One of the most comprehensive and historically significant accounts of food, sacrifice and the place of meat in religious practice can be found in the Mahabharata, one of the two great Hindu epics. Chapter 88 of the Anushasana Parva is a renowned dialogue between Yudhishtir, the eldest son of the Pandava brothers, and the great patriarch Bhishma.

Yudhishtir questions Bhishma about the kind of food to be served in the sacrifice (yajna) and ancestral rituals to ensure complete satisfaction and pleasure of the ancestors. The answer given by Bhishma is stunning in its specificity and its ease with the giving of different meats. According to him, when herbs, shrubs, and vegetables are provided, the ancestors will be contented a month. They will be contented at least two months in case fish is provided. Three months, in case meat is served. If the meat of hare is offered, for four months. In case there is goat meat on the menu, five months. Suppose that bacon shall be proposed, six months. Should birds be given, seven months. If venison (deer meat) is offered, for eight months. The list is endless and buffalo kept the ancestors happy eleven months. Most

¹² *Manusmriti*, 5:49.

importantly, Bhishma says that when the flesh of a cow is provided, the ancestors will be contented at least one year. And when the red meat of a goat or the meat of a rhinoceros is presented, they will be contented without ceasing - interminably.¹³

This verse of one of the most sacred books of Hinduism leaves no doubt that the culture of Hinduism does not entirely forbid the consumption of meat, including beef. Mahabharata does not consider these offerings to be a sin but as a way of worshipping and honoring the ancestors of people- the greatest responsibility in Hindu culture.

3.4 Evidence from the Vedas

Rigveda, the oldest of all the Hindu scriptures, makes a number of references to killing and eating of animals, especially in the sacrificial ceremonies. The gods were offered cattle, horses, goats, and sheep and the meat was frequently eaten by the priests and the assembled community when the ritual was over.

The Book 10, Hymn 86, Verse 14 of the Rigveda tells of the god Indra, who is the lord of the Vedic deities: "*They cook for me fifteen plus twenty oxen.*"¹⁴ This source indicates without any doubts that the bull drinking was not prohibited in the oldest strata of the Hindu tradition. The deity himself is shown to be eating the feast.

The history also indicates clearly that the great sages and saints of the Vedic times were not vegetarians. They lived in forests and subsisted on what was available in the land and engaged in sacrificial ceremonies which included

¹³ *Mahabharata*, Anushasana Parva, Chapters 88.

¹⁴ *Rigveda*, 10.86.14.

preparation and consumption of meat. The picture of the ancient Hindu sage as a rigid vegetarian is not an ancient Vedic fact, but a historical creation.

3.5 The Ahimsa Philosophy and its logical boundaries

Ahimsa, or non-violence/non-harm to living things, is one of the most strong and beautiful moral principles that came out of the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist cultures. Gradually, especially with the emergence of Jainism and Buddhist influence on the Hindu thinking, Ahimsa became closely related to vegetarianism. The argument was easy to understand, because when an animal is killed, it is hurt and its life is taken, it is a violent act, hence a sin. There is however a critical logical glitch to this argument, which is emotionally compelling, but has a critical logical hitch when it is brought to the fore. The issue is as follows: plants are living beings as well. They have life. It is confirmed by modern science that plants do now react to their environment, respond to injury and do generate chemical signals when damaged, which operate in a manner similar to a stress or pain response. A scientist and farmer in the United States translated the frequency of the responses of plants into the range that a human being can hear and discovered that plants make measurable signals when they are cut, when they are thirsty and when they are hurt. Sounds are usually heard by the human ear within the range of twenty to twenty thousand cycles per second; this is not the case with the plant, which is why we do not tend to notice them. But that we can hear them not, does not imply that we can hear them not at all.

Others holding the contrary opinion point out that although plants may be alive, they possess fewer senses than animals - indeed, they may possess two or three fewer senses, and so the evil to a plant is a lesser evil than the evil to an animal. However, this argument fails to pass the test. Imagine that

a person is born deaf and is unable to speak. Should that individual be injured or even killed, any court of law or of moral tradition would not tell us that the penalty of the offender should be less because the victim had two senses wanting. Indeed, the majority would say the contrary, that any individual who is incapable of either protecting himself or seeking help should have much more protection. The amount of senses a creature has does not dictate the moral gravity of killing it.

It implies that a literal interpretation of the Ahimsa principle, which would imply that it is a sin to kill any life, would result in a human being never being able to survive at all, as any food he/she eats disrupts the life of some kind. This fact is directly covered by the Quran, Surah Al-Baqarah, Chapter 2, Verse 168, where it states:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا¹⁵

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good”

The divine command is not impossible. It challenges human beings to consume what is clean, allowed and is in accordance to their nature which in this case is animal food which biology and scripture both affirm to be true.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1 Islam and Hinduism Andreear points of agreement

Islam and Hinduism have a lot in common, although there are numerous differences between their worldviews, animal slaughter has some

¹⁵ *Al-Qur'ān*, 2:168.

significant common ground. In both traditions, it is acceptable that killing an animal should be with a proper reason. In both, wanton cruelty, slaughtering as entertainment or inflicting suffering on animals unnecessarily is condemned. Islam specifically prohibits the unjustified destruction of animals and Hindu scriptures such as the Mahabharata also disapprove of the needless violence.

The two traditions also associate the eating of food to a spiritual aspect. This is the reason why in Islam the name of Allah is to be uttered during the slaughter and that the slaughtering is no longer a simple physical process but a worship and recognition of the sovereignty of the divine. The Vedic tradition also sacrifices the animal to the gods, and the context of the ritual also transforms the act of killing into more than just murder. In both the killing of animals as a source of food is presented in the sense that it must be an act that is carried out with acute awareness, with gratitude and under the guidance of God.

Moreover, the two traditions are sincere towards the wellbeing of the animal. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), instructed that the blade should be sharpened and the animal touched tenderly. Certain Hindu texts also describe the animal sacrificed as one that rises to a higher spiritual condition as a consequence of being sacrificed - a kind of theological comforter which shows an appreciation of the worth of the animal.

Both traditions are also in agreement- when approached honestly enough to see that the argument of total vegetarianism as a universal religious imperative fails in their own scriptural test. According to the Manusmriti, meat is allowed by divine law. The Mahabharata includes meat sacrifices as the best kind of tribute to the ancestors. Gods eat meat, as it is described in the Rigveda. And the Quran clearly allows the meat of legal animals. The

vegetarian ideal, noble though it is in either of the traditions, is not a scriptural command but an ethical development.

4.2 Key Differences

The clearness and generality of the permission is the most significant distinction between the two traditions. In Islam, permission to consume meat is liberal, unambiguous and universal to all Muslims in all times and places. Permissible animals are listed in the Quran, the Hadith gives the procedure of slaughter and the Islamic jurisprudence has constructed a complete and consistent law of food, known as Halal, on these basis. Mainstream Islam does not have any major internal controversy on whether meat is allowed or not; this has been resolved through the divine text.

In Hinduism, the right to consume meat on the other hand is conditional, contextual and historically controversial. The various scriptures assume contrasting stands. Various philosophical schools of thought have different values. Jain and Buddhist pressure inclined Hindu moral discussion more and more towards vegetarianism as the years went by, such that what formerly was a commonplace in the Vedic era, slowly became a source of shame or taboo in many communities.

The question of the cow is the most sensitive and the most historically significant difference. Cow is sacred in Hinduism and its slaughter is prohibited in most of the Hindu communities and is unlawful in many of the states in India. Cow is a perfectly legal animal to eat in Islam and it is regarded that the slaughtering of a cow during the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha is one of the most spiritually rewarding activities. Such is one of the most enduring origins of religious and communal conflict in the Indian subcontinent in the entire history of the Indian subcontinent, a single

difference despite its deep roots in the various theological systems of the two traditions.

4.3 The part played by Intention

A question of intention is one of the places in which both traditions intersect in a philosophically rich manner. The Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him) starts its path in Islam with the initial principle:

إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ¹⁶

"Actions are judged by intentions"

The Muslim has to slaughter an animal with the name Allah in his lips and the true intention to comply with the command of Allah. Even a technically proper slaughter becomes invalid in its spiritual validity without the proper intention.

A similar teaching can be found in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 3, Verse 9:

"Work done as a sacrifice for Vishnu has to be performed,
otherwise work causes bondage in this material world."¹⁷

The point here is that any action that is done as an act of devotion and sacrifice even the slaughtering of an animal as a ritual is spiritually elevated and does not have the karmic effects of selfish action. In both religions, the ritual framing elevates the act of killing to a sacred one.

¹⁶ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Book of Revelation, Hadith no. 1.

¹⁷ *Bhagavad Gita*, 3:9.

5. Conclusion

This comparative paper has explored the Islamic and Hindu standpoints on the issue of whether animals can be slaughtered to provide food under several levels - scriptural, logical, biological and historical. The results are a much more complex and more balanced picture than the common interpretation of either of the traditions.

Islam has a coherent, consistent and God-sanctioned allowance of meat eating that is based on various verses of the Quran in Surah Al-Maidah (5:1), Surah An-Nahl (16:5), Surah Al-Mu-minun (23:21) and Surah Al-Baqarah (2:168, 2:173). This is condoned by the biological fact of the human body its teeth, its digestive system and its demand of the essential amino acids, which can only be obtained in combination in flesh food. Dhabihah, as practiced by Islam is not a brutal act as many may think, but rather a well-prescribed procedure that ensures minimal suffering of the animals, and meat is cleaner and healthier. It is a procedure that can be justified by the contemporary science both as humane and hygienic.

On its own ancient texts and not by the prism of the modern popular practice, Hinduism has been shown to have a tradition that also tolerated and even glorified the consumption of meat, in particular religious and social contexts. This is explicitly stated in the Manusmriti (5:30, 5:31, 5:40) where it is said that the consumption of food animals is not a sin, and ritual slaughter is the will of God. A detailed description is given in Mahabharata (Anushasana Parva, Chapter 88) where even the flesh of cows are enumerated as an offering that leads to the ultimate satisfaction of the ancestors. The Rigveda (10.86.14) even describes the gods themselves eating meat. These books never refer to vegetarianism as the original or universal Hindu rule.

The Ahimsa philosophy though truly noble and ethically so, encounters logical problems when pushed to the extreme as even the life of plants is one of taking life. In the depths of their scriptures, both Islam and Hinduism recognize that the human beings are created to partake of the entire variety that the earth has to offer, in moderation, with an attitude of gratitude, and per the divine wisdom.

Instead of making food practices a point of contention among the scholars and communities, the best productive solution would be to acknowledge that both traditions demand the same thing; to know the origins of food, to be thankful to the Creator, to be humane to living things, and to avoid waste and cruelty. These are universal values and they are shared.

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