

A TASTE OF HEAVEN
ADVENTURES IN FOOD AND FAITH

PUBLISHED BY LIONEL BLUE & JUNE ROSE

PROF. KHURSHID AHMAD



PROFESSOR & MRS. KHURSHID AHMAD – AT HOME WITH ISLAM

By June Rose

Islam means submission or obedience to God or Allah and a Moslem is a person who submits to God in everything he does. Jews on the other hand, are a "stiff-necked" people, with a two thousand year old tradition of arguing with everybody - including God. And there are other more recent differences too! So it was with a twinge of misgiving that I made the journey to Leicester to visit Professor Khurshid Ahmad, the Director of the Islamic Foundation. I need not have worried. From the moment that he welcomed me to the city until he and his small son drove me to the station to go home, I met with the most cordial and open-hearted hospitality.

The Islamic Foundation is housed in an imposing detached villa set back from the main road in the centre of Leicester. It serves as research, educational and cultural centre for the seven million Moslems in Europe. Decorated prints of pages from the Quran and maps of the Moslem world adorn the walls. Over six thousand volumes furnish the library. The day that I visited the Foundation, a group of young men in flowing robes with small round hats (not unlike the Jewish kippah, a head covering also worn in respect to God) were present for a day of prayer and study. I was surprised to hear that one of them had a Yorkshire accent! He was a convert from Sheffield, attracted to Islam by its deep sincerity.

Professor Ahmad, a stocky, shy academic, with a direct gaze, took me upstairs to his office. While he explained the basic elements of the faith, we were served with tea.

'Islam is a simple religion' he told me, 'We don't have too many festivals. In the Qur'an it is written expressly that God created food for man to use carefully and purposefully. Islam abhors waste. We do not waste any food or water. In fact, we regard eating everything on your plate and leaving it clean as a positive virtue.'

'There are two major festivals in the Moslem's year, two "Eidin". "Eid al Fitr", the little feast, comes after the fast during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of our year, when adult Moslems fast from dawn to dusk. During that month no food or water may pass our lips till nightfall. 'The feast begins with the new moon and at dawn everyone puts on new clothes. We eat Shir Kurma special dessert prepared for the occasion and then we go to special prayers in the Mosque.'

'In the Moslem countries thousands of people gather together on the open plains or in the Mosques.'

During this festival friends and relatives visit each other or send greeting cards. Food is offered all day long and small gifts of delicacies and sweetmeats are popular.

'In the days of the prophets' Professor Ahmad told me, 'Moslems used to break their fast with dates soaked in milk overnight and sweetened with honey. They taste delicious.'

Two months and ten days after Ramadan, Moslems celebrate Id al Adha, their great festival. At this time those who can, make the pilgrimage to the Kabah, the House of Allah and the heart of the world of Islam in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. To make a Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a religious duty once in a lifetime for those who can afford it. Those who cannot make the journey join the pilgrims symbolically in prayer and sacrifice.

'The pilgrims themselves' Professor Ahmad explained 'return to their origins, historically and metaphorically. They sleep in tents, abandon western clothes and don simple unstitched white cotton sheets. During the festival the pilgrims spend four days in the desert. At Mina, near Mecca, they offer up a lamb, goat, cow or camel to commemorate Abraham's love of God and the Prophet's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael when he had finished building the Kabah.

All over the world Moslems recite prayers on that day and, when they can afford it, they have an animal slaughtered in sacrifice. After their prayers they take the meat home and carefully divide it. One third of the meat goes to friends and relatives, one third to the poor and elderly in need and one third is kept for their family. 'Traditionally,' smiled Professor Ahmad, 'we start the meal by eating the animal's liver, fried or grilled.'

He looked at his watch. We were late for Sunday lunch. Dr Ahmad telephoned his wife and (I think) discussed the menu with her. (I had asked if it were possible to taste the traditional food of the faithful.)

We drove out to the suburbs (his car had a prayer in Arabic from the Qur'an on the dashboard); we stopped at a local grocer's shop to buy spices and groceries. Terraced houses painted in turquoise, pink or orange and small groups of young men with black fez caps added an exotic flavour to this Midlands town.

In her home, Mrs. Azra Ahmad with her family of four little children, from a girl of one and a half to a girl of seven, lovely dark children with melting eyes, welcomed me. While Professor Ahmad sat with his small son on his knee, helping him to recite prayers, Mrs. Ahmad made the lunch.

Our conversation was a little curtailed because of language limitations. Mrs. Ahmad is in purdah, which she feels is quite natural. (This means that she cover herself and will not appear in public in front of strange men.)

'Nothing is hard if you have the habit' she explained 'I would be ashamed to show myself in front of men'.

In no time at all, the table was attractively laid, with meat, salad and rice; the children had washed their hands and rinsed their mouths (a Moslem religious duty) and we ate together.

Water or orange juice or Coca-Cola were offered. Orthodox Moslems, Professor Ahmad told me, do not like to be at a table where alcohol is served.

'It is impossible to imagine a Moslem meal without water' Professor Ahmad said; in all their customs. Moslems recall the arid life of the desert.

After a brief Grace:

**'All praise to God
Praise to God who has filled us, quenched
our thirst and made us his obedient servants.'**

and the washing of hands and rinsing of mouths, we settled down to talk about recipes, while the children played.

Kheer

3 dessertspoons rice

A little less than a teacup sugar

2 pints (1135 ml) milk

Pistachio nuts to decorate

Boil the milk and rice together, stirring continually for an hour, over a low heat. When the milk has turned cream coloured, add the sugar and stir until the mixture becomes thick. Take the pan off the stove, mash the rice and add thin slices of pistachio nuts.

Shir khurma

This is a sweet pudding, eaten throughout the Moslem world on Sweet Eid, after the Feast of Ramadan. The dates and milk recall the days of the Prophet.

2 teaspoons butter or ghee

2 pints (1135 ml) milk

¼ lb (115 g) almonds

¼ lb pistachio nuts

6 dried dates

2 tablespoons cooked vermicelli

½ cup sugar

Fry the vermicelli in the butter or ghee. Put aside while you chop the dates finely and grind the nuts. Boil up the milk and add the nuts, simmer on a low light for 10 minutes, then add the sugar, stirring continuously. After 20 minutes add the fried vermicelli and boil for 5 to 10 minutes, until the pudding is cooked.

Rice pilaw with lamb or chicken

1 yoghurt (natural)
1 lb lamb or chicken cut in slices
2 cups rice
2 onions
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 small stick cinammon
a few cardomons - 4 or 5
1½ teaspoons powdered cummin
5-6 black peppercorns
salt to taste
2 or 3 cloves (optional)
¼ lb (115 g) butter
pinch of saffron

Slice the onions and fry them until golden in a braising pan. In the meantime wash the rice and leave it to soak for 15 minutes with the saffron. Fry the meat quickly in the pan with the onions for a few minutes and add all the seasoning and spices plus 3 cups water; stir, then cover the pan and simmer on a low gas for 20-25 minutes until the water has evaporated. Drain the rice and fry it for 2 minutes in the pan, add 4 cups water and cook the rice on a low gas until all the water has evaporated. This will take about 25 minutes. As soon as the rice is ready (the easiest way of finding out is to taste a little) stir in the saffron and the yoghurt and serve.

Chicken qarma

1 chicken, jointed - about 4 lbs (1820 g)
6 medium onions, sliced
3 teaspoons salt
2 teaspoons ground chilli
(if this is too hot for your taste, substitute paprika)
¼ lb (115 g) butter, margerine or oil
2 black and 2 white cardamoms
1/3 teaspoon of powdered garlic
1 tablespoon of yoghurt

Fry the sliced onions golden brown, then add the chicken joints, browning quickly on both sides. Shake in spices, season and fry the mixture for 15 minutes, stirring all the time. Then add the yoghurt, 2 cups water and put the lid on the pan; simmer for 30 minutes and serve with rice.

You will obviously discover your own variations on the seasoning when you make this dish.
