

Food culture and religion

Food is an important part of religious observance and spiritual ritual for many faiths including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex and varies among individuals and communities. Any introduction to such a diverse and complex topic will not be able to include everything. Instead, here is a sample of some ways in which various religious groups include food as a vital part of their faith.

Understanding the role of food in cultural and religious practice is an important part of showing respect and responding to the needs of people from a range of religious communities. However, it is important to avoid assumptions about a person's culture and beliefs. If in doubt, ask.

Christianity

The various faiths of Christianity include Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. The regulations governing food and drink differ from one to the next, including some faiths that don't advocate any restrictions.

Selected facts include:

- Some Catholic and Orthodox Christians observe several feast and fast days during the year. For example, they may fast or avoid meat on Fridays, during Lent or on Good Friday. Some eat fish instead.
- Most Protestants observe only Easter and Christmas as feast days and don't follow ritualised fasting.
- The ritual of communion is regularly celebrated by many Christians. This involves eating bread and drinking wine (or substitutes) to represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
- Some Christians don't drink alcohol. These include many members of the Salvation Army and other Protestant churches.
- Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists also avoid caffeinated and alcoholic beverages. Many Seventh Day Adventists don't eat meat or dairy products. Those that do eat meat don't eat pork.
- Self-denial (of food), or fasting, is sometimes considered to be 'praying with the body'. It is believed to improve spiritual discipline by overcoming the sensations of the physical world and focusing on prayer and spiritual growth. It may also be used by some Christians as a way to respect those people around the world who regularly face starvation or malnutrition.

Judaism

Judaism can be Liberal or Orthodox, depending on how strictly people follow (adhere to) the Jewish laws. Kashrut refers to the laws pertaining to food in the Jewish religion. Kosher means that a food is 'fit' or permitted. Foods such as pork and shellfish are strictly forbidden. The Jewish 'food laws' originated more than 3,000 years ago and contribute to a formal code of behaviour that reinforces the identity of a Jewish community. Food forms an integral part of religion in life for a practicing Jew.

Other selected facts include:

- Foods must be prepared in the right way in order to be Kosher; for example, animals that provide meat must be slaughtered correctly.
- The consumption of certain foods, including dairy products and fish, is subject to restrictions; for example, there are rules forbidding the mixing and consumption of dairy products with meats.
- Ritualised fasting is also included in Judaism. For example, Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – is a Jewish fast that lasts from approximately dusk till dusk.
- Jewish feast days include Rosh Hashanah and Passover.
- The Passover commemorates the birth of the Jewish nation. The food eaten helps to tell the story of the Exodus; for example, bitter herbs recall the suffering of the Israelites under Egyptian rule.

Islam

Moderation in all things (including eating and dietary habits) is central to the Muslim way of life. When done according to the way of Allah, daily acts like eating are considered a form of worship. In Islam, the concept of Halal – meaning 'lawful or permitted' – is applied to all areas of a person's life and includes regulations surrounding food. All foods are allowed (Halal) except for those that are considered harmful. Prohibited foods (and other aspects of life) are called Haram.

Other selected facts include:

- The list of Haram foods includes pork, alcohol and any products that contain emulsifiers made from animal fats, particularly margarines.
- Bread or bread products fermented by yeast may possibly contain traces of alcohol and so may be considered Haram.
- Gelatine made from pork or from any other animal that is not Halal is forbidden. (Some gelatines may be Halal.)
- Caffeinated drinks such as coffee may be considered Haram.
- Muslim fasting periods vary. The month of Ramadan requires mandatory fasting from dawn until dusk as do other dates of religious significance, such as the ninth day of Zul Hijjah.

Hinduism

Hindus believe in the interdependence of life. People who practice the Hindu religion don't eat meat from animals or any food that has involved the taking of life. They also avoid foods that may have caused pain to animals during manufacture. 'Karma' is believed to be the spiritual load we accumulate or relieve ourselves of during our lifetime. If a Hindu consumes animal flesh, they accumulate the Karma of that act, which will then need to be balanced through good actions and learning in this life or the next.

Selected facts include:

- Many Hindus are vegetarian but this is not compulsory.
- Depending on the level of adherence to this belief, in many cases beef is forbidden while pork is sometimes restricted or avoided.
- Prohibited animal products tend to vary from one country or region to the next. For example, duck and crab may be forbidden in one geographical location while fish may be part of the staple food for people living in other areas.
- Most Hindus do not eat beef or beef products, because the cow is held to be sacred.
- Dairy products including milk, butter and yoghurt may be eaten.
- Foodstuffs such as alcohol, onions and garlic are thought to inhibit the Hindu's quest for spiritual enlightenment. They are therefore avoided or restricted.
- Fasting depends on the person's caste (or social standing) and on the occasion; for example, rules regarding fasting depend on whether the day has religious or personal significance.

Buddhism

The dietary rules of Buddhism, which is more of a life philosophy than a religious doctrine, depend on which branch of Buddhism is practiced and in what country.

Selected facts include:

- In his multiple lives on Earth, Buddha cycled through various animal forms before attaining the form of a human being. Most Buddhists choose to become vegetarian to avoid killing animals.
- Similarly to the Hindu concept of Karma, Buddhism proposes that violence or pain inflicted on others will rebound on you, hence the need for a vegetarian lifestyle. Some Buddhists believe that a contributing cause of human aggression is violence against animals.
- Some Buddhists avoid meat and dairy products, while others only shun beef. This is affected by cultural, geographical and dietary influences.
- Religious dates vary from one region to the next. Mahayana Buddhism, for example, celebrates three festivals for the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha, while Theravada Buddhists observe all three events on a single day.
- Buddhist monks tend to fast in the afternoon.
- Buddhist monks and nuns are not allowed to cultivate, store or cook their own food; instead, they must rely on 'alms', which are donations from believers. This sometimes includes meats, as monks and nuns aren't allowed to ask for specific foods.

Where to get help

- Your religious or cultural advisor
- Your place of religious observance

Things to remember

- Food is an important part of religious observance for many different faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.
- The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex and varies among individuals and communities.
- If you are providing hospitality to people from different backgrounds, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays.
- A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available.

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Better Health Channel

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