

Food in Religious Texts

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Food is one of the greatest fosterers of togetherness. It brings a group of people together in an environment where each has an individual seat, but all share one table- a fitting metaphor for a world in which we are all unique, yet share a common humanity. Many contemporary dietary practices are shaped not only by culture, but by religious belief. Across the world, people make the choice to eat or avoid certain foods based on the laws of these beliefs, leading to a vast collection of fascinating, culturally and theologically significant foods. Because of this, sharing food with those of cultures and beliefs dissimilar to our own can help us to learn more about others, grow closer to our global community, and become more sensitive to the differences between cultures.

In celebration of this culinary diversity, let us take a look at the sacred dietary practices from all over the world.

Hinduism

The writer Rutvij Merchant interestingly defines Hindu as one who is an ardent seeker of Truth: "An Individual who strives to actively discern the existence of the objective Reality otherwise termed as God and attain Him if convinced of His existence, using means that are inherently subjective and dependent on the individual's own proclivities, beliefs and values, is a Hindu"(Tharoor,44). Hinduism is a religious tradition that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism is often referred to as *Sanatana Dharma* by its practitioners, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "the eternal law". Hinduism is the world's oldest major religion that is still practised. Its earliest origins can be traced to the ancient Vedic civilisation. A conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions, Hinduism has no single founder. The countries with large Hindu populations include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago.

Hindus advocate the practice of *ahinsa* (non-violence) and respect for all life because divinity is believed to permeate all beings, including plants and non- human animals. The term *ahinsa* appears in the *Upanishads*, the epic *Mahabharata* and *ahinsa* is the first of the five *Yamas* (vows of self- restraint) in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

In accordance with, many Hindus embrace vegetarianism to respect higher forms of life. While vegetarianism is not a requirement, it is recommended for a sattvic (purifying) lifestyle. Estimates of the number of lacto vegetarians in India (include inhabitants of all religions) vary between 20 percent and 42 percent. The food habits vary with the community and region, for

example, some castes having fewer vegetarians and coastal populations relying on seafood. Some Hindus avoid onion and garlic, which are regarded as rajasic foods. Some avoid meat on specific holy days.

Observant Hindus who do eat meat almost always abstain from beef. The largely pastoral Vedic people and subsequent generations and relied heavily on the cow for protein- rich milk and dairy products, tilling of fields and as a provider of fuel and fertilizer. Thus, it was identified as a caretaker and a maternal figure. Hindu society honours the cow as a symbol of unselfish giving. Cow- slaughter is legally banned in almost all states of India.

No food is forbidden in ancient Hindu texts, but non- violence against all life is recommended. The oldest Hindu text, the Rig Veda, is often interpreted as denouncing the consumption of meat. Because of this, many Hindus prefer a vegetarian or vegan diet, and methods of food preparation that are not harmful to animals or to the environment.

Particularly important to the Hindu tradition is a food called ghee- a type of clarified butter. In Hindu culture, cows are sacred, and butter is the only animal fat that many Hindus will consume. Ghee is used in religious rituals, burned in sacred lamps. When the Vedic ritual of pouring ghee into fire is performed, it is a re-enactment of creation.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the world's fourth- largest religion with over 520 million followers, known as Buddhists. Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on the teachings attributed to the Buddha and resulting interpreted philosophies. All Buddhist traditions share the goal of overcoming suffering and the cycle of death and rebirth, either through the attainment of Nirvana or through the path of Buddhahood. The historical figure referred to as the Buddha (whose life is known largely through legend) was born on the northern edge of the Ganges River basin, an area on the periphery of the ancient civilization of North India, in what is today southern Nepal. He is said to have lived for 80 years. His family name was Gautama (in Sanskrit) or *Gotama* (in Pali), and his given name was Siddhartha (Sanskrit: "he who achieves his aim") or *Siddhatta* (in Pali).

No killing of any sentient being nor using animal products (milk, eggs, leather, feathers, etc. - similar to vegan) was permitted in Buddhism. Oddly, the cuisines of all the predominantly Buddhist populations feature meat. Alcohol and other intoxicants are forbidden because they may result in violations of others of the "Five Moral Precepts": no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying or partaking of intoxicants. Also intoxicants cloud the mind and interfere with the concentration needed to achieve enlightenment.

Onions, Garlic, Scallions, Chives and Leeks, "the five pungent spices" are forbidden for some sects (China, Vietnam) for pretty much the same reason as in Hinduism, they're said to lead to anger (raw) and passion (cooked), but the Buddhists add that their odours repel gods and attract hungry ghosts and demons.

Jainism

Jainism, traditionally known as Jain Dharma, is an ancient Indian religion. The main religious premises of Jainism are *ahimsā* (non-violence), *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness), *aparigraha* (non-attachment) and asceticism. Devout Jains take five main vows: *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (not stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy or chastity), and *aparigraha* (non-attachment). These principles have impacted Jain culture in many ways, such as leading to a predominantly vegetarian lifestyle that avoids harm to animals and their life cycles. The practice of non-violence towards all living beings has led to Jain culture being vegetarian. Devout Jains practice lacto-vegetarianism, that is eat no eggs, but accept dairy products if there is no violence against animals during their production. Veganism is encouraged if there are concerns about animal welfare. Jain monks and nuns do not eat root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and garlic because tiny organisms are injured when the plant is pulled up, and because a bulb or tuber's ability to sprout is seen as characteristic of a higher living being.

Sikhism

Sikhism (Sikhi, from Sikh, meaning a “disciple”, “seeker”, or “learner”), is a monotheistic Indian religion that originated in the Punjab region in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent around the end of the 15th century. It is one of the youngest of the major world religions, and the world's fifth-largest organized religion, as well as being the world's ninth-largest overall religion. The fundamental beliefs of Sikhism, articulated in the sacred scripture Guru Granth Sahib. Intoxication: Consumption of alcohol, non-medicinal drugs, tobacco, and other intoxicants is forbidden in Sikhism according to the “Sikh Rahit Maryada”.

Christianity

Christianity is a monotheistic religion centred on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as depicted in the New Testament. Christianity teaches that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, and that the New Testament records the Gospel that was revealed by Jesus.

Christianity began as a sect within Judaism and includes the Hebrew Bible (known to Christians as the Old Testament) as well as the New Testament as its canonical scriptures. Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is classified as an Abrahamic religion.

The Seven Laws of Noah often referred to as the Noahide Laws, are a set of seven moral imperatives which, according to the Talmud, were given by God to Noah as a binding set of laws for all mankind. According to Judaism any non- Jew who lives according to these laws is regarded as a Righteous Gentile and is assured of a place in the world to come (Olam Haba), the Jewish concept of heaven.

One of the seven laws given by God to Noah includes: “Prohibition of cruelty to animals: Do not eat flesh taken from an animal while it is still alive. The Talmud states that the instruction to not eat “flesh with the life” was given to Noah, and that Adam and Eve had already received six other

commandments. Adam and Eve were not enjoined from eating from a living animal since they were forbidden to eat any animal.

Laws and customs regarding food vary widely between different Christian denominations, with many groups observing no dietary restrictions at all. In early Christianity, meat and dairy products were avoided during certain times of the year, but today, the most well-known and holiest dietary practice is the consumption of bread and wine- sometimes replaced by grape juice- during Holy Communion in the Protestant tradition or the Eucharist, in the Catholic tradition. The symbolism of bread and wine began in Christ's time, when these were very common foods.

Judaism

In Judaism, foods are divided into two groups- *kosher*, which is allowed, and *treif*, which is forbidden. According to the Tora, only animals which chew and have cloven hooves are permitted for eating, and four animals are expressly forbidden as food- the hare, camel, hyrax, and pig. Also forbidden are insects and reptiles. In addition to this, even *kosher* animals must be slaughtered using a specific process for the meat to be considered acceptable for use by the Jewish people. Meat and dairy products may not be eaten together, and must be kept separate. Interestingly, utensils, plates, bowls, and even sinks and dishwashers can inherit a "meat" or "dairy" status through prolonged contact with either type of food. All plant-based foods are kosher except for wine and other grape products produced by non-Jews.

Torah

The Torah is the first part of the Jewish bible. It is the central and most important document of Judaism and has been used by Jews through the ages. Torah refers to the five books of Moses which are known in Hebrew as *Chameesha Choomshey* Torah. These are: *Bresheit* (Genesis), *Shemot* (Exodus), *Vayicra* (Leviticus), *Bamidbar* (Numbers), and *Devarim* (Deuteronomy). Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after their exodus from Egyptian slavery.

Rabbinic tradition holds that Moses learned the whole Torah while he lived on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights and both the oral and the written Torah were transmitted in parallel with each other. Where the Torah leaves words and concepts undefined, and mentions procedures without explanation or instructions, the reader is required to seek out the missing details from supplemental sources known as the oral law or oral Torah. One of the Torah's most prominent commandments needing further explanation is:

Kashrut: A young goat may not be boiled in its mother's milk. In addition to numerous other problems with understanding the ambiguous nature of this law, they are provided by the oral tradition. This is particularly relevant to this law, as the Hebrew word for milk is identical to the word for animal fat when vowels are absent. Without the oral tradition, it is not known whether the violation is in mixing meat with milk or with fat.

Islam

The Arabic word Islam literally means “surrender” or “submission”. As the name of the religion it is understood to mean “surrender or submission to God”. One who has thus surrendered is a Muslim. Traditional accounts of the emergence of Islam stress the role of Muhammad, who lived in western Arabia at the beginning of the 7th century AD. Muhammad experienced a series of verbal revelations from God. Among other things, these revelations stressed the oneness of God, called mankind to worship Him, and promised that God would reward or punish men according to their behaviour in this world. Muhammad was to proclaim God’s message to the people among whom he lived, most of whom practised polytheism.

As in Judaism, the eating of pork is prohibited, and consumption of alcohol is forbidden in Islam. Meat must be slaughtered according to an approved ritual or else it is not halal. The Five Pillars of Islam are five practices essential to Sunni Islam which include: *Sawm*, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. Muslims must not eat or drink (among other things) from dawn to dusk during this month, and must be mindful of other sins. The fast is to encourage a feeling of nearness to God, and during it Muslims should express their gratitude for and dependence on him, atone for their past sins, and think of the needy. *Sawm* is not obligatory for several groups for whom it would constitute an undue burden. For others, flexibility is allowed depending on circumstances, but missed fasts usually must be made up quickly.

Many practices fall in the category of *adab*, or Islamic etiquette. This includes greeting others with “*as- salamu- alaykum*” (“peace be unto you”), saying *bismillah* (“in the name of God”) before meals, and using only the right hand for eating and drinking. Muslims, like Jews, are restricted in their diet, and prohibited foods include pig products, blood, carrion, and alcohol.

The Qur’an forbids meats from animals which die of natural causes, the blood and meat of pigs, and animals that have been dedicated to idols, or to any deity other than Allah. All meat must be properly prepared in order for it to be halal. The animal must not suffer, and must not see the blade used in the process. It must also be slaughtered while speaking the name of Allah. All intoxicating drink is prohibited under Islamic dietary law. Despite these regulations, Muslims are permitted to eat any food in times of necessity such as if they are starving.

While the dietary practices of different religions vary, and the rationale for each practice is based upon different texts, there is also much commonality. The practice of fasting is almost universal across religious groups, and most regard it as a mechanism to discipline the followers in a humbling way for spiritual growth.

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