

Religion and Food

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

When you look at different religious traditions, particularly the festivals and holidays that are associated with them, you'll find that each tradition has a special food or some special approach to food. In this tutorial, you'll look at some of the major religions and their relationships with food. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Kosher](#)
2. [Halal](#)
3. [Ramadan and Passover](#)
4. [Lent](#)
5. [Eastern Religions](#)

1. Kosher

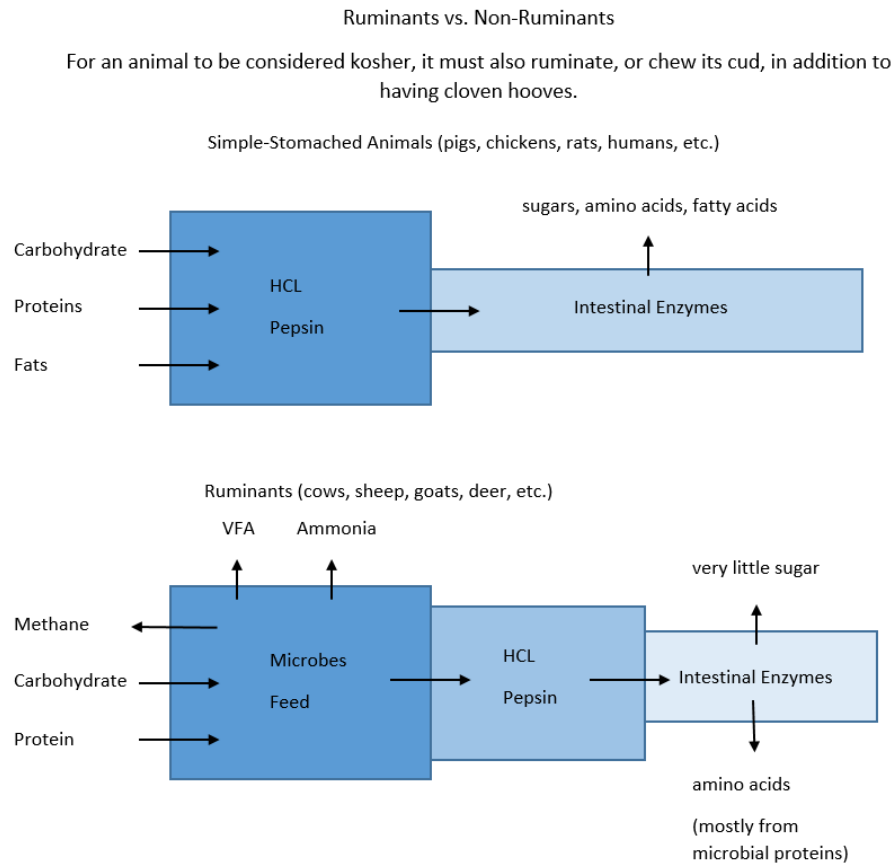
In any community, religious or not, one thing that brings people together is food. It forms a central aspect of a culture's identity and is a universal custom. It's hard to say that gathering around food has a specific religious origin, but it is possible to talk about certain traditions that honor some aspect of their religion with customs related to food. These are elements of religious cultural identity.

In Judaism, the term **kosher**, or kashrut, refers to food that is fit for consumption. It generally means that a particular food is suitable and even advantageous. Those that are not kosher are considered unclean and therefore forbidden. Unclean animals are considered non-kosher according to Halakhah, or Jewish law. About one in six American Jews practice the kosher diet. The Torah, mostly in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, lays out the prescriptions and the prohibitions on certain foods.

The rationale, however, is usually a matter of oral tradition and oral law, and these interpretations and the details surrounding fit versus unfit for consumption were eventually written down in the Talmud. One of the most honored prescriptions or prohibited foods for many Jews is pork.

For an animal to be considered kosher or ritually clean, it must ruminate or chew its cud, and it must have cloven hooves. So while a pig does have cloven hooves, it does not ruminate, and it is therefore considered unclean

and not kosher. A cow, on the other hand, does have cloven hooves and it does ruminate; so, it is therefore fit for consumption. However, only certain parts of the cow are considered kosher.



In the Talmud, it also states that dairy products and meat cannot be cooked together. The reason behind this is that an animal cannot be cooked in its mother's milk. There are many different approaches and explanations and ways of understanding these laws. Some Jewish theologians don't think it's the job of humans necessarily to understand and explain these laws so much as to simply follow them, trusting God's intentions and direction.

Others, such as the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, on the other hand, believed that we could use reason to uncover these intentions and understand these laws. Still many believe that there's vice and virtue at stake when one consumes kosher and non-kosher foods. In other words, various animals and other foods carry symbolic significance that must be honored if one is to receive spiritual benefit.

In the Jewish tradition of Chassidism, it's often believed that sparks of holiness can be effectively drawn into the world by actions that have religious intentions behind them. Kashrut, or kosher food, is one important way of connecting with divinity.



TERM TO KNOW

Kosher

The observance of religiously based dietary restrictions in Judaism.

2. Halal

The structure of this belief and holy action related to food is not unique to Judaism. In Islam, Sharia law originating in the Qur'an, indicates what is permissible or non-permissible in all aspects of life. The term is **halal**, and its opposite is **haram**. For food, there are specific indications about what is considered lawful and unlawful to eat. With regard to animals, it also concerns and indicates the manner in which the animal is slaughtered, or killed.

Pork is prohibited and consuming any animal carcass or carrion is also forbidden. Any animal that has been beaten or died as a result of a fall is also considered haram. For a particular meat to be considered halal, the animal must not have been unconscious before death and must have been slaughtered in a particular manner with Allah's name being invoked at the time.

Furthermore, the animal must have enjoyed a diet that was free of additives and unnatural ingredients. However, there are some exceptions to these rules or laws, as stated in the Qur'an. If there's absolutely no other food available, a Muslim may consume non-halal food.



TERMS TO KNOW

Halal

An Arabic term meaning permissible, often used to refer to foods that are considered acceptable to consume in Islam.

Haram

An Arabic term meaning forbidden, often used to refer to foods that are not considered permissible to consume in Islam.

3. Ramadan and Passover

For special celebrations, feasts, and commemorations, the various religions have their own laws and prescriptions. In Judaism, during Passover, or Pesach, it's forbidden to eat leavened bread, or hametz. The idea is to remember the Exodus from Egypt when Moses led the Israelites out of captivity, and it was the unleavened bread that sustained them on their journey back to the Promised Land.

In Islam, during the holy month of Ramadan, many Muslims honor the tradition of fasting, abstaining from food and drink, during the hours between dawn and sundown. This practice is often accompanied by increased prayer and reflection. It's a time to consider and commemorate the divine revelation received by the prophet Muhammad. The month of Ramadan concludes with the feast of Eid al-Fitr, usually indicated by the sighting of the new crescent moon, the beginning of a new lunar cycle.

4. Lent

For Christians, both Orthodox and Catholic, though usually less often for Protestants, many take the time before Easter to fast in recognition of the time Jesus retreated to the desert before his public ministry and his death on the cross.

According to the Gospels, Jesus encountered the devil and was presented with many challenges and temptations during this time in the desert. So for Christians, denying oneself food and bodily pleasures represents resisting temptation. Fasting is believed to help bring the practitioner closer to Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit.

This period, called Lent, is a time of reflection, prayer, and fasting. In the Middle Ages, fasting included abstaining from eating meat, dairy, alcohol, and other dietary pleasures. Consuming these were thought to lead a person to greater and more dangerous lusts. Today many Christians still recognize similar guidelines, although they vary from one denomination to another. Generally, most denominations recognize Fridays during Lent as a time to abstain from meat and poultry.

5. Eastern Religions

In some of the Eastern religions, it is strongly encouraged to avoid eating meat altogether, and in some cases, it is forbidden. In Buddhism, there is something called the five precepts. The first precept states “I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.” Most Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as many lay practitioners, practice vegetarianism then in honor and respect for all living, sentient beings.

In Hinduism, many people practice vegetarianism, and they refer to the sacred texts in support of this practice. In the Mahabharata, it says that nonviolence is the highest duty and the highest teaching. Another Hindu sect that follows this principle of non-violence that is translated into vegetarianism is the Swaminarayan Movement. It consists of a diet that forbids the consumption of meat, eggs, and seafood.

Followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and followers of Vaishnavism too, in addition to not eating meat, fish, and fowl, even abstain from eating certain vegetables—such as garlic and onions—and mushrooms (fungus). These are believed to contain negative properties that hinder higher consciousness and are thought to contain a lesser grade of goodness. This, therefore, affects one’s consciousness negatively when consumed. Many Hindus focus their attention on foods that inhabit the higher realms of natural goodness and act as an aid to spiritual development.



SUMMARY

Many of the different religious traditions have things in common with regard to food. There are laws and prescriptions or prohibitions, and there’s a structure for identifying what is lawful and in line with God’s will. In Judaism, you looked at the terms **kosher** and non-kosher. You also looked at the equivalent in Islam, with **halal** and haram. **Passover and Ramadan** are celebrations in these two religions where food plays a special role. There is a prohibition against eating leavened bread during Passover, and Ramadan is a month of fasting. In Christianity, there is a practice of fasting during **lent** and abstaining from certain foods as a way of identifying with the challenges and suffering of Christ. You

also learned about the relationships between food and **Eastern religions**. You looked briefly at Buddhism and Hinduism and the common practice of vegetarianism, which reflects the principle of non-violence that is present in those traditions.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Kosher

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