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Religious Implications for Agriculture, Diet, and Social Issues

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Abstract

As religion and food affect practically everyone everywhere, studying religious motivations for agricultural and consumption patterns is vital. To understand this topic, food-related views of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Rastafarianism, Hinduism, Orang Asli, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Daoism, and Wicca are analyzed. Most belief systems include taboos on meat, genetic modification, and biocides. The reasoning for their food ethics determined each faith's categorization as Western or Eastern. Western-type religions focus on respecting their God's intentions. Christianity forbids meat, excepting fish, during certain holy seasons to honor God. One sect, Greek Orthodox, requires believers to eat vegan 1-3 days weekly. Judaism and Islam both ban pork, as pigs are thought to contradict God's plan. Muslims also do not consume genetically-modified foods which contain pig products. Likewise, Rastas ban meat, seasonings, and alcohol so as to honor God's intentions. Eastern-type religions focus on respecting living beings. Hindus promote vegetarianism and forbid genetically-modified foods deemed to hurt other life forms. Followers of Orang Asli prescribe to non-industrial methods of acquiring food, including hunting, fishing, gathering, and sustenance farming for their health. Buddhism recommends avoidance of alliums, alcohol, and meat, including eggs, with food being eaten mindfully. Jains are vegetarians and, to ensure no insects have fallen inside, inspect all items before consumption. Sikhs also practice vegetarianism. Daoists favor organic farming, while utilizing

other practices attuned to natural cycles. Wicca utilizes the Rede, "Do what you will if it harms none," so most Wiccans eat vegetarian. Religions worldwide are major influencers in food ethics.

Keywords: Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, Religious Food Ethics, Food Ethics, Agriculture, Social Issues

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1. Introduction

Religions are well-known for their ethical precepts. One area where most religions have particularly fascinating doctrine is their food ethics, pertaining to both acceptable agricultural methods and acceptable dietary habits. In this research, 11 faith traditions have been selected to study. To eliminate bias, they have been chosen in order to include variety in geography, demographics of their followers, age of the religion, and popularity. Ways food is grown, prepared, and eaten were researched. Three themes were found among these belief systems, the most common of which is meat taboos, followed by avoidance of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), then organic-farming preferences. The similarities of these 11 sets of religious food ethics suggests a universal, human urge to grow food and eat it in a way which is ethical, both spiritually and socially.

2. Process of Categorization

Each of the 11 religions examined were categorized as either Western-type or Eastern-type, not based on geography but based on their food-related motivations. They are named Western-type because most of the faiths within this category were founded in the Western hemisphere (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Rastafarianism), while Eastern-type religions are named thusly because most of the faiths within this category were founded in the Eastern hemisphere (Hinduism, Orang Asli, Daoism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, with the exception of Wicca). None of the food

ethics of the 11 religions studied fit both the Western-type and Eastern-type categories. However, the most important part of this categorization is not necessarily where that religion was founded or where that religion is commonly practiced today, but their motivations regarding food practices. For example when concerning food ethics, most Western-originated religions primarily revere God while most Eastern-originated religions primarily revere life. However, although Wicca (a popular denomination of the diverse Pagan tradition) was founded in the Western hemisphere (particularly Western Europe) and includes belief in deities, this faith is categorized as Eastern-type because Wiccans seek to "harm none" instead of appease a god through their food choices (Higginbotham & Higginbotham 214). Since Wiccan motivations for their food ethics are aligned with the life-oriented motivations of religions founded in the Eastern hemisphere, Wicca is categorized as Eastern-type. Although overlap in motivation exists in many belief systems, Western-type religions focus on how their foods show respect towards God, while Eastern-type religions focus on how their foods show respect for life.

3. Vegetarianism, GMO Avoidance, and Organic Farming

Faith-based bans on animal flesh serve many purposes, including being important for forming bonds, growing spiritually, improving health, aiding the environment, and lessening the number of lives taken. According to Robert Fuller, religions advise boundary setting behavior to their followers as means of establishing identity and feelings of connection. Therefore, prohibitions on certain consumption patterns, such as that of meat, are vital for creating bonds (Fuller 497-498). Meat bans also aid spiritual growth, as specifically demonstrated by *kosher* (the designation given to morally-permissible foods in the Jewish tradition) dietary laws. With these laws, animals are banned "as unfit for the table" if they are not anatomically similar to those creatures described in the Genesis cosmology (Douglas 71). Vegetarianism, specifically examined within the traditions

of Greek Orthodoxy, Hinduism, and Sikhism, also functions as a means of bettering health and the environment (Palmer 227-228). Renowned conservationist, Dr. Jane Goodall, explains how harmful animal-based agriculture is to ecology. Most consumed animals are raised on intensive, crowded, diseased farms (Goodall 40-41), which pollute natural resources and wildlife (Goodall 145-150). Therefore, by withdrawing support of these industries with vegetarianism, many faiths aid the environment. As surmised from the above information, this theme of religious abstinence from meat also preserves more lives, including those of the believers, farmed animals, and wildlife.

Many different religious traditions have doctrines related to GMOs and genetic modification (GM) of food. The issue of GMOs, also known as transgenic foods, is highly polarized, with theological, social, health, and environmental stances. Western-type religions especially worry if genetically engineering crops is a way of "playing God," with over two-thirds of Christian Protestants labeling "GM foods as unsafe," regardless of the fact there is currently no way to know the extent of the effects of GMOs (Sanford 159). However, many Jewish Rabbis assert that "genetic engineering is not a violation of Jewish law," so GM foods are kosher (Sanford 167). Muslims take a middle-ground approach, as GM foods are only permissible if the genetic material is from halal (or acceptable) sources (Sanford 166). Therefore, if a genetically-engineered food contains genes from a pig, then that food is not halal. For Eastern-type religions, Sanford also describes conditional Hindu attitudes towards genetic engineering. She shares that, like Muslims, only certain types of GMOs are acceptable, but unlike the other traditions, focuses solely on how a GM food would impact other life forms (Sanford 166-168). Perhaps a middle ground is needed, with GM foods being avoided when possible but eaten when needed, especially as most of the health and environmental impacts cannot be known for years to come. This kind of solution would be better accepted by varying faiths, instead of a solution like all crops being non-GM or all GM.

Growing food organically is also another important part of religious food ethics. Certain Christian communities within the Baptist denomination recommend growing food without pesticides or herbicides, as such methods are closest to God's intentions and Biblical ideals (LeVasseur 48 & 54). Followers of Rastafarianism usually sustenance farm organically, as they see their God Jah as having made each plant just the way that plant should be. Adding chemicals or seasonings would contradict God's intentions (Homiak 148). With the invention of biocides, contemporary Daoists have responded by urging that all foods be grown without artificial chemicals so as to respect natural cycles through their food choices (Goodman 73). Individuals in many other religions may also choose to grow organically or primarily buy organic foods. The motivations for organic agriculture most often include reverence for a deity's intentions, but also relate to avoidance of disrupting natural cycles.

4. Western-Type Religions

Western-type religions examined included Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Rastafarianism. The first 3 faiths originated in the Near East, but all 4 are purveyors of monotheism and are motivated by a reverence for their God's intentions. They are highly related, as are their food intentions. All of these Abrahamic, monotheistic, Western religions share a belief in one powerful God who created existence. This God goes by many names, including the Jewish Yahweh, Muslim Allah, and Rastafarian Jah. These religions' relationship to food, therefore, focuses on respecting this God through caring for His creation.

Jewish culture has long held a deep faith in Yahweh and reverence for creation. Relatedly, Jews are not allowed to eat certain kinds of food, with particular restrictions on meat like pork and shellfish, which are seen as contradictory to Yahweh's plan. These animals are banned "as unfit for the table" because they are not anatomically similar to those creatures described in the Genesis

cosmology (Douglas 71). When medical advancements revealed that mainly only undercooked pork was harmful to health, many Jews still prohibited pork out of religious duty and "submission to divine will" (Harris 68-69). Additionally, meat and dairy products are not allowed to be served touching (such as in a cheeseburger), as touching is disrespectful to the animals. Many Jewish Rabbis assert that "genetic engineering is not a violation of Jewish law," so GM foods are kosher (Sanford 167). Jews demonstrate their respect for Yahweh through their dietary choices.

Christianity is the most common religion in the world with 2.3 billion followers (Fairchild n. pag). As part of their fasting obligations, Greek Orthodox Christians are required to eat vegan 1-3 days weekly. They eat less animal products during the holiest seasons, so as to honor their God (Palmer 227). Also, over two-thirds of Christian Protestants label "GM foods as unsafe," with many followers asserting genetically engineering crops is a way of "playing God" (Sanford 159). Therefore, GMOs are often avoided. As part of the New Monasticism movement, different Christian agrarian communities have been created with goals of interracial equality, ecological food systems, and enacting Biblical virtues. These New Monasticism values originated from the Bible's teaching "that the earth is the Lord's…property" (LeVasseur 49), so must be respected. Every day, the members, and any guests, share locally-grown meals, over which they pray communally. Their food is grown on-site, with most of their crops being organic. Members follow lifestyles like those lives described in the Old Testament: full of prayer, farming, and caring for livestock. Koinonia Farm is an interesting example of New Monasticism as the project provides a living example of Christian principles and stories embodied in an-action based community (LeVasseur 59). This action is important, as it shows the practicality of living in prayer, working with the land, and respecting natural resource limits.

Islamic food traditions were also studied, finding Muslims are not allowed to eat certain kinds of food if they contradict Allah's intention with creation. This intention is clarified in the Islamic creation story, in which land animals ate cud and were made with cleft hooves. As pigs defy Allah's original plan that land animals must have both cleft hooves and consume cud, pork is included among non-halal foods. Specifically, pigs only have cleft hooves, but do not chew cud, so are deemed unnatural and sacrilegious by Muslims (Harris 47). Regarding genetic modification, Muslims take a middle-ground approach, as GM foods are only permissible if the genetic material is from halal sources. Therefore, if a GM food contains genes from a pig, then that food is not halal (Sanford 166). Islam helps followers to revere Allah's intentions through their food practices.

Rastafarianism is a common religion in the Caribbean. Rastas believe in reverence for Jah, including believing Jah made all foods with the appropriate seasonings (Homiak 148). Therefore, no sugar or salt is allowed, which would contradict Jah's intentions. The Rasta diet is called ital, which consists of mostly fruits and vegetables grown in the believer's own yard or foraged nearby (Nowakowski n. pag). Rastas also grow this food organically and without fertilizers (Bramen n. pag). Aligning with ital restrictions, Rastafarians avoid shellfish, meat, dairy, fish, and alcohol (Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 198; Bramen n. pag). When preparing foods, believers will not use additives, preservatives, artificial colors, salt, sugar, or most spices (Bramen n. pag; Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 198; Homiak 147; Nowakowski n. pag). If food is ever bought, the item is never canned or otherwise a processed food (Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 198; Nowakowski n. pag). Often, believers will use clay pots when preparing meals. This earthenware is seen as beneficial to physical and spiritual health, while connecting Rastafarians to the land Jah created. In place of traditional cups and plates, Rastafarians use coconut shells and leaves, respectively (Homiak 145). Rastafarians use food in a way to become closer to Jah.

5. Eastern-Type Religions

Eastern-type religions examined include Hinduism, Orang Asli, Daoism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Wicca. With the exception of Wicca, they all originated in Asia, particularly in India, Malaysia, and China. They are grouped together because of their motivation of compassion for all lives. The most commonly-related of these Eastern-type religions are Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which all 3 originated in India. These 3 religions further focus on accruing good karma across reincarnations to achieve *moksa*, or spiritual fulfillment, which influences their food ethics to varying degrees. Across these faiths, desirable karma is achieved through *ahimsa*, or non-violent compassion towards all living, sentient beings.

Hinduism, though it traditionally asked for animal sacrifice, began advocating for kinder animal practices and vegetarianism starting with the Laws of Manu between 600 BC and 200 CE (Walters & Portmess 41). Swami Vivekananda, Mohandas Gandhi, and Swami Prabhupada were all avid advocates of Hindu vegetarianism (Walters & Portmess 39). Only certain types of GMOs are acceptable to Hindus. Unlike other traditions, the motivations for avoidance of certain GMOs focuses solely on how a GM food would impact other life forms. GMOs deemed to hurt other living beings are banned (Sanford 167-168). Yogurt, eggs, and milk are staple foods for many Hindus (Schmidt 99). Hindus use food to holistically practice ahimsa.

Globally, 150,000 people practice Orang Asli (Singh 1). Orang Asli describes the variety of indigenous people found in and near the jungles of West Malaysia. The purpose of their food restrictions is to maintain the spiritual well-being of individuals and resource partitioning. Unlike the other Eastern-type religions who focus on the wellbeing of all lives, their reverence for life is particularly focused on human health. They mostly subsist by gathering wild plants, hunting, and fishing in nearby jungles, but also farming “wet padi, tapioca, fruits and vegetables” (Masron et al

78). Although Orang Asli followers originally enjoyed a diet rich in variety, in contemporary times, they have fallen victim to malnutrition as their average meal consists of white rice topped with salt (Singh 2). Members of Orang Asli are working hard to restore their lifestyle and health.

A traditional Chinese religion, Daoism (also called Taoism), teaches that humans are influenced by the *Dao* (the will and way of existence) as much as any other creature. What happens in non-human affairs very much affects and interrelates with humanity. There are 2 main Daoist concepts relating to food: reversion and *wu wei* (which translates as "effortless action") (Goodman 73). Reversion is represented in the growth and decay of natural cycles. These cycles include water, nitrogen, seasons, and even life itself. Reversion can be applied to natural forces and ways of living. It describes how all systems are in an eternal, balancing, dynamic cycle of growth and decay, with each extreme encouraging its opposite to manifest. Reversion is the nature of the Dao. Essentially, Daoism teaches that to live a good life, people need to learn to work with, and relate to, the external world in a way that balances both the internal and external dynamics. In other words, followers work with, not against, the land and other living beings. Wu wei, which is working within the natural cycles, forms the corresponding action to the belief in reversion. Actions within the wu wei category do not disrupt natural cycles or non-human life, but rather work with these cycles. These Daoist concepts are most often applied to agriculture. Wu wei advises to plant seeds in the right season, to grow where a particular crop grows best (sun or shade, wet or dry, etc.), to dig irrigation canals aligned with natural waterways to reduce energy waste, and, contemporarily, to grow organically (Goodman 73-80). Daoists help maintain natural cycles through their agricultural practices.

Buddhism minimizes consumption of meats, eggs, alliums, and alcohol, as these food and drink items are seen as going against ahimsa. Meat consumption is deemed rooted in craving and

violence, which oppose Buddhist values on non-attachment and ahimsa, with all sentient beings considered having buddha-nature (Walters & Portmess 61-62). Eggs are viewed as containing life force, so likewise cannot be eaten. Alliums are root vegetables including garlic, scallions, onions, and leeks. Since these plant species must be uprooted, and therefore killed, to be consumed, alliums are banned. Respect for spiritual exercises and eventual Buddhahood means many Buddhists live lacto vegetarian lifestyles (Walters & Portmess 69 & 73). Not only do Buddhist food ethics incorporate which foods should be eaten, but also how foods are eaten. Mindfulness began as a Buddhist spiritual exercise in ancient India, being first referenced in the sacred text Satipatthana Sutta near the founding of Buddhism around 2,500 years ago (Wilson 217). Being mindful means being attentive to the senses in daily life, notably in eating. Mindfulness is "a state of pure self-awareness," contemplation, and quieted thoughts, bringing decreased heart attack risk and decreased anxiety (Ford 64-65). Mindful eating is a significant part of mindfulness. Mindful eating includes intentionally challenging "automatically finishing everything on your plate" (Mulpeter 84-85), by instead being attentive of the body's needs in terms of quality and satiety. Mindful eating includes attentiveness to the action of chewing and all senses (Mulpeter 84-85). In these ways, Buddhist precepts prescribe a strict vegetarian diet consumed with mindful awareness.

Jainism's founder, Mahavira, stressed right conduct, faith, and knowledge through avoiding any harm to sentient beings. Mahavira's teachings therefore require all followers to be strict vegetarians, with Jain food taboos fully permeating. A unique food tradition, Jains are required to inspect all food and drink before consumption to ensure no small animals have fallen inside. Additionally, Jains are not allowed to consume fruits or nuts unless the food has already fallen naturally off the tree or bush. Although lay practitioners do adhere to these rules to an extent,

monks and nuns follow these guidelines most firmly (Walters & Portmess 4 &39). Through the strictness of their harvesting techniques and diet, Jains respect the lives of animals and plants.

Worldwide, 23 million people follow Sikhism (Schmidt 98), another religion which requires follows refrain from animal flesh. As vegetarianism within Sikhism functions as a means of bettering health and the environment, Sikh food ethics are considered motivated by a reverence for life. In other words, Sikhs use compassion and respect for all lives as motivations for their not eating meat (Palmer 228). A staple food for Sikh vegetarians is *puri*, a fried bread made of wheat (Schmidt 113), and cow milk (Schmidt 99). However, this preference for puri and milk is most likely due to ease of access more than official doctrine. Sikh food practices have daily implications for aiding living beings, especially those including abstaining from meat.

Although having originated in Europe, Wiccan food ethics share similar motivations to those ones of eastern religions. Wiccan ideological themes are interconnectedness and blessedness. Interconnectedness refers to the belief that everything and everyone impacts everything and everyone else, while also stressing the importance of reciprocal aid. Blessedness is the belief that all beings are inherently good. With this good naturedness, humans are viewed as endowed with a moral compass. As each being is interconnected and is inclined to choose actions which are best for the good of the whole, each Wiccan is only required to abide by a single rule called the Rede: "do what you will if it harms none" (Higginbotham & Higginbotham 197). Most Wiccans interpret this rule to include all life, including animals and plants, so live vegetarian lives (Higginbotham & Higginbotham 214-215). Wiccans revere the blessed, interconnected nature of life through their avoidance of animal products.

6. Health Implications

As shown above, religious food ethics ban many foods. Some of these food taboos include pork, shellfish, chemically-grown foods, eggs, and meat in general. However, these food bans not only aid believers spiritually, but also have implications for personal health. The Blue Zones are 5 places where people commonly live healthily to age 100. These regions are studied to find the best lifestyle practices. According to studies of the Blue Zones, people should eat fruits, green vegetables, beans, nuts, and whole grains daily to remain healthy, while avoiding meat and eggs. They also commonly garden and grow their own food organically (Blue Zones Life n. page). Therefore, the diets of all 11 religions studied help improve health and longevity, much like religiousness itself also improves health. Interestingly, out of the 263 centenarians in the original Blue Zones study, 258 adhered to a particular religion (Buettner 22). The specific religion and denomination were found to be irrelevant to health or longevity, but what was most important for health regarding religiousness was that the individuals attended their religion's worship service weekly (Buettner 22). Strong evidence suggests that religious observance of dietary restrictions and worship services can improve physical health.

7. Environmental Implications

Religions around the world have used a variety of methods to make their food spiritually permissible, with their avoidance of meat and biocides tied to sustainability. According to the United Nations, animal agriculture is one of the leading causes of air pollution, water pollution, erosion, climate change, and biodiversity loss (Livestock's Long xx). By limiting meat intake and especially not consuming meat altogether, followers of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Rastafarianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Wicca avoid support of this unsustainable industry. Of course, herbicides and pesticides also have a negative ecological footprint. These biocides especially harm biodiversity and water health (Bellec et al 1). By

avoiding pesticides, New Monastic Christianity, Rastafarianism, and Daoism avoid unnecessary environmental harm. Religions have long addressed an array of environmental issues, through both their agricultural and dietary practices.

8. Animal Welfare

Since followers of many of these religions abstain from animal products, they can also be viewed as champions for farm animal welfare. Most operations farming animals for their products in contemporary times are considered confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). In these CAFOs, livestock and poultry are overcrowded and otherwise mistreated. They usually are unable to turn around, exercise, or breathe fresh air, "restrictions that result in severe physical and psychological maladies" (How We Treat 3, Watkins Glen). As juveniles and without pain relievers, beaks are cut off, toes are cut off, they are castrated, ears are notched, and tails are docked. Throughout the animals' lives, CAFO employees are regularly documented as kicking, whipping, and electrically shocking the animals raised for human consumption (How We Treat 4, Watkins Glen). The United States submits 10 billion farm animals annually to these conditions (How We Treat 3, Watkins Glen). By reducing and refraining from meat consumption, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Rastafarians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and Wiccans reduce animal suffering and needless slaughtering.

To demonstrate how some believers actively use their religion to promote humane animal treatment, a case study of the Christian Polyface Farm will be used. Although the farm does still raise and slaughter animals for human consumption, the founder Joel Salatin uses his faith's scripture as a guide to treat the animals in his care with kindness. Salatin takes particular inspiration from Biblical scripture like "let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more" and "[t]he land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and

tenants" (Shiva 287-288). Chickens, cows, and pigs spend almost their entire lives on Polyface Farm, compared to conventionally-raised livestock and poultry who are frequently moved. They spend much of their time outdoors in spacious pastures, a contrast to CAFO-raised animals who rarely see the sun and spend their time in cramped warehouses (Shiva 288). Animals are not kicked or beaten, but treated with dignity and compassion. When the animals are slaughtered, the act is done onsite and quickly to minimize stress (Shiva 289). Salatin uses his faith to find "a moral way to raise a chicken" for food (Shiva 289). When asked their opinion of industrial CAFOs, members of Polyface Farm respond that these operations do not "honor the chickenness of a chicken" (Shiva 292). Religions can play a major role in the welfare of farmed animals, especially when religious food ethics are closely followed by believers.

9. Workers' Rights

As Jews, Christians, Muslims, Rastafarians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and Wiccans avoid meat, with Rastafarians, Orang Asli members, and Daoists avoiding industrialized farming, religions also avoid support of contemporary animal agriculture and the practice's related labor infractions. CAFOs are often considered one of the worst places for anyone to work regarding human rights abuse, as injuries and abuse are rampant; CAFO workers are often stabbed, kicked, bitten, and amputated, which lead to emotional stress, drug addiction, alcoholism, child abuse, and spousal abuse (Eisnitz 66 & 67 & 75 & 170). By growing food themselves and/or not eating meat, many believers combat unfair labor and their disastrous effects on individuals and societies.

10. Conclusions

As we have seen, food guidelines are heavily ingrained in religious ethics. Throughout these traditions and many others, food, and the ethics of food production and consumption, remains a vital focus in their ethical precepts. Religions provide guides for how to farm, what to eat, how to

eat, and what not to eat. These rules also serve important functions for bettering believers' health, mitigating environmental crises, animal welfare, and workers' rights. Religious food ethics act as an example for a hopeful, global foundation of a better, more-ethically-based food system. These 11 religions valued meat reduction, avoidance of genetically-modified foods, and growing crops organically. As can be surmised from these findings, highly-spiritual individuals across the world have always realized the importance of food ethics for bettering the world. By utilizing religious food ethics, an array of important social issues is aided.

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