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Narrative

Religious food guidance

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Abstract

This article reviews some of the ways in which food intersects with religion and argues that people's religious food habits prepare them to critically engage the food they eat. Religious food guidance is presented through five categories: permanent food restrictions, temporary food restrictions, food offerings, charity, and food for special occasions. The underlying rationale behind these food habits, and religion in general, allows religious people to be fully engaged in current discussions about how to align eating with best practices globally.

Keywords: Religion; religious; restrictions; food; fasting; offerings; charity; meat; community; Christians; Jewish; Muslims; Buddhists; Hindus; Jains

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Introduction

This article makes a case for the importance of religion, and religious people, in critical food guidance. The evidence comes primarily from extensive fieldwork that Ellen Desjardins and I have done in person within a wide range of religious communities around the world (throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North and Central America), between 2006 and the present. This fieldwork, continually reviewed by my university's Research Ethics Board, to date has included nearly 300 semi-structured interviews with individuals who self-identify as religious.[1] It has helped to expand a subfield[2] within the academic study of religion. Scholars have long noted the role that food plays in the specific religion(s) they've explored, but the subfield of food and religion is relatively new. A mere handful of university courses, for example, are taught around the world on the topic, and it is rare to see sections devoted to food in introductory textbooks on the world's religions.

Many factors guide our food choices. Price is one. More Canadians will buy avocados at a dollar per kilo than they will at a dollar per avocado. Star power is another guiding factor. Food recommended by a popular actor or athlete is more likely to end up on someone's plate. The food industry, for its part, continues to design and market food that people find hard to resist. Canada's Food Guide is widely used, especially in institutions. Nutritionists also carry weight, although less than they might hope. Food writers have columns in mainstream media, and our social media platforms abound in food advice. Family and cultural traditions contribute to the mix. Dahl or pasta? Steak or tofu? Wild or domesticated meat, or no meat at all? Our bodies also guide our choices. Do I gain weight easily? Am I gluten or lactose intolerant? Physicians are also happy to tell us what to eat; so too our peers, as well as those engaged in animal rights discussions, gender studies, and environmental movements.

This article adds another factor to that long list: religion. Why? Because religion matters in the world, food matters to religion, and most academic discussions about food overlook religion.

Just how is religion linked to food? Consider the following five categories, which emerged from our data analysis. First, there are permanent food restrictions. Judaism and Islam's "Thou shalt not eat pork" is one type of restriction; Buddhism and Hinduism's "Removing meat from your diet makes it easier for you to become more spiritually developed" is another. Second, there are temporary food restrictions, or fasting practices, that range from total to partial short-term food avoidances, for a variety of reasons. Third, food offerings are made to beings in the spirit world, including ancestors and gods, with some also directed at religious leaders. Fourth, "feeding the poor," or food charity, is synonymous for many with being religious. This type of

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[1] Select publications that emerged from this research include Desjardins (2013, 2015, 2016), Desjardins & Desjardins (2009, 2012), and Desjardins & Mulhern (2015).

[2] The two earliest collections of articles in this emerging subfield are Zeller et al. (2014) and Illman & Dahla (2015). These collections are good places to start in appreciating the types of questions that scholars situated in various parts of the world are asking, across traditions and across academic disciplines.

charity is a quasi-universal expression of religious ideals through the medium of food. And fifth, foods are an intrinsic part of special religious occasions. Think about Christmas, Diwali, or Chinese New Year—or another tradition you might know better—and specific food dishes are likely to come to mind more readily than anything else.

More categories could easily be added. The bottom line is that lived religion, as it is expressed across the world today, intersects with food in several respects. Religious food guidance is not only relevant to critical food guidance but can help align our food choices with our responsibilities as global citizens.

This field report is intended to engage readers grounded in food studies. Several words of caution: the worldviews and practices of religious individuals and groups are invariably more layered and complex than academic generalizations about them might suggest. Comparisons between religious traditions only increase those challenges. Also: "religion" goes by many names, including "spirituality" and "way of life," and can be understood and practised by adherents in vastly different ways. This article, therefore, does not speak for everyone whose mental universe includes belief in a spiritual reality. It is grounded in our extensive fieldwork, feedback from hundreds of students over the years in a senior course I continue to teach on this topic, and in my academic career as a scholar of religion.

Now imagine the following as you would a Nanaimo Bar. Part 1 is the base. It offers a more detailed overview of these five food-related categories, proposing how each one might engage critical food guidance. Part 2 is the custard layer, which focuses on those points of intersection. Part 3, the conclusion, is the chocolate ganache. It presents some creative examples of food guidance that emerge directly out of religious communities.

Part 1: The role of food in religion

This part expands on the five food-centric categories noted above: permanent restrictions, temporary restrictions, offerings, charity, and special religious occasions. The first two are more salient to my argument, but all five are relevant.

Permanent food restrictions

Religions quite often concern themselves with what their members should and should not eat. Foucault (1990) would have called this the moral problematization of pleasures.

One approach to religiously proscribed foods emerged in ancient India, and another in the Middle East. The Indian-based system—represented most clearly in Jainism, but also found in Buddhism and Hinduism and some expressions of Sikhism—is grounded in the principle of non-violence. It encourages people to eat food implicated in the least possible amount of violence. The killing of animals for food, in this context, is thought to produce the most violence, so meat

is the primary type of food that is restricted, or at least problematized. The Middle Eastern system—represented here most clearly by Judaism and Islam—takes a different position. This system is grounded in the principle that sacred texts are God's way of communicating directly with people and God's commands in those texts need to be obeyed without question. Some of those commands, given in the Bible and the Qur'an (Leviticus 11:1–47; Qur'an 2:168–169; 173), forbid the eating of certain foods.

The Indian- and Middle Eastern-based systems differ in tone when it comes to permanent food restrictions. The Indian-based religions are rooted in the notion of reincarnation: people are thought to be reborn countless times, until they manage to perfect themselves and escape their cycle of reincarnations. In that context, recommendations for better food behaviour can more readily be made. "You can advance in your spiritual development quicker," a religious sage in Varanasi told us, "if you reduce or remove meat from your diet." If one chooses to avoid this advice, life goes on, and spiritual progress is simply delayed. When it comes to meat eating, Jainism stands on the edge of this permissive ethical stance because non-violence (*ahimsa*) is at the heart of its ideology; to be "properly" Jain is to avoid eating meat.[3] Generally, though, in Indian-rooted religions the onus is placed on the individual to decide on the best way forward when it comes to restricting foods.

On the other hand, in Middle Eastern-rooted religions the food restrictions are fixed. The leaders of these religions believe that people have only one go-around on the earthly plane before their non-physical soul enters another space, to stay for eternity. Follow God's commands and you increase your chances of a pleasant eternity (in heaven). That context less easily allows for gentle nudges and slow progression. A "thou shalt not eat pork" command is more than a gentle nudge.

No reason is given in those sacred texts for these food restrictions. It was not uncommon in our interviews to hear Jews and Muslims argue that God, in giving these commands, intended to protect his people from the unhealthy aspects of pork, and that pigs are disgusting animals (dirty, promiscuous, omnivorous, etc.) that pass on their moral and carnal characteristics to those who eat their flesh (you are what you eat). But those reasons, and others like them, are insider attempts at explaining teachings that come with no explanation.

There are exceptions. For one thing, not all members of these religions adhere strictly to their group's food guidance, just as they do not always adhere to their group's guidance on other matters. Jews, for example, live their connection to Judaism in many ways. Some self-identify as atheists, many happily eat pork, and others spend their days reading sacred texts. Moreover, with few exceptions, the largest religious group in the world today—Christianity, an offshoot of Judaism—does not impose permanent food restrictions on its members. Given the numerical and

[3] For more information on Jain food practices, see the classic study by Mahias (1985), especially Chapter 4 (pp. 85–125).

global importance of Christianity it is possible to forget that most other religions advocate for some form of food restrictions.

How do permanent religious food restrictions matter for critical food guidance? Religious food restrictions in general, I would argue, sets the stage for someone to accept other types of food restrictions grounded in a different set of values and beliefs. People who belong to a religion that tells them they should be restricting their diet for religious reasons are well started on the path to critical food guidance. Negotiating what and what not to eat becomes part of their cultural DNA.

Permanent food restrictions found in Indian-based religions are more directly transferable to discussions surrounding critical food guidance because they are grounded in a set of clear ethical principles. Making one's diet accord with religious principles is easily extendable to other principles, such as sustainability of the land and animal rights. Moreover, the principle of non-violence itself, so often linked to religious food restrictions, is quite amenable to extension—for example, reducing the violence one does to the environment, the land, the animals, and the farmers who cultivate crops for us.

Temporary food restrictions

Temporary food restrictions among religious groups are even more common than permanent restrictions. Some involve total abstention from food and drink for a relatively short period. In addition to the Ramadan fast for Muslims, from sunrise to sunset during an entire month, there are, for example, the Bahá'í annual nineteen-day fast from sunrise to sunset (modelled on Ramadan) and the twenty-five-hour Yom Kippur fast in Judaism. Other fasts can involve the removal of one or more food and drink items for a set or indeterminate amount of time. One thinks of the forty-day Lenten period before Easter for some Christians, and various Hindu fasts that are intended to curry favour with a specific deity or holy person (e.g., with someone thinking "I'll refrain from eating my favorite sweet as a sign of my devotion to you and hope you can help me find a suitable spouse for my daughter").

Jains, abiding by their principle of non-violence and linking eating of any sort with violence (the less food taken in, the less violence committed), are frequent fasters. In fact, when approaching death some Jains, as an act of ultimate devotion, slowly withdraw from food until they die.

There are other reasons given for fasting. They include empathizing in some way with the sufferings experienced by ancestors and religious leaders (e.g., thinking "Jesus was crucified for my sins; the least I can do is fast for 40 days leading up to the commemoration of his death"), and creating room in one's life for thoughtful, spiritual development.

Temporary food restrictions, like the permanent ones, can prepare people to be guided more broadly in their food choices. How? Fasting puts pause to the cycle of meal after meal,

burger after burger. A religious individual is encouraged to eat with more intentionality.[4] Moreover, based on the fieldwork we have done, the temporary restricting of food—enough to feel hunger—is often accompanied by expressions of hope, justice, and a desire to do better for others. These ideals, and that mindfulness, are part and parcel of critical food guidance.

Offerings

Food is presented to gods and other entities in the spirit world, and sometimes to religious leaders, in many religious traditions. These offerings are symbolic and concrete ways of showing devotion to supernatural powers, and those intimately connected to them. In some parts of the world, food offerings are the most common public expressions of religiosity. "Come and eat!*"* is the offer when laying out the food to the spirits, or simply, "Know that we care about you, and trust that you will continue to shower us with your care."

Gods and various types of spirits are thought to be drawn into our material world by food. One feeds the ancestors, the bad spirits, and the good spirits to keep them happy, thank them for their help, ask them to help, and generally because…well, because that is what one does with food. One feeds the religious leaders as a sign of respect for what they do and to earn rewards in the spirit world.

Sometimes the spirits are even thought to enter the food itself, allowing people to ingest divinity. It is as though food were the membrane through which members of the spirit world cross over into ours. This process, for example, happens for Catholic and Orthodox Christians during their Communion ritual, when some form of bread and wine is transformed into the "body and blood of Christ," to be ingested by community members. These Christians are not alone in imagining that they take God in through food; if one adds Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists to Catholic and Orthodox Christians roughly a quarter of all people in the world, nearly two billion people, believe that spirits enter human bodies through food.

The idea that food can be the conduit between the material and spiritual worlds intersects with critical food guidance in two main ways. First, the offering of food significantly enhances the preciousness of food in people's minds. Sometimes a loaf of bread is just a loaf of bread, but bread can also be divinity. So too rice and maize, other staples on which people depend, that can possess divine power for religious individuals. Or that first mango of the season, as we appreciated one day in an elderly woman's home in a small town outside Matanzas, Cuba. Someone who is accustomed to conceptualizing food in this manner can readily understand the argument that food in this world—growing it, caring for it, eating it—is precious.

Second, some food offerings require specific plants, which can be threatened by environmental changes, including climate change that enhances the spread of invasive species.

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[4] Note, for example, that Ramadan is as much about feasting (after the sun sets) as fasting (abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset). Also crucial is the disruption of the regular practices of eating and drinking. An excellent, rarely cited study on the complexities of this fast is Diouri (1994); see also Möller (2005).

One sees this in Indigenous communities across the world, including Santería, a religion grounded in West African traditions. Priests from that tradition with whom we talked in Cuba and later in America bemoaned the disappearance of plants they considered necessary to draw the spirits into their communities. It certainly does not take much to convince those people that more care needs to be taken to preserve traditional crops and nurture the land.

Charity

Religions have long helped people cope with hunger. With few exceptions, religious groups aim to ease the pain of others by feeding their poor, and often the poor outside their communities. They do so in creative ways, including sharing food at their places of worship, setting up food banks, contributing to disaster relief operations, and distributing food to people in other countries.

Religious food charity is relevant to critical food guidance mainly because an increasing number of people are now facing food insecurity and famine due to human-generated causes like wars, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity.[5] This also comes at a time when religious groups in some places in the world, including Canada, are in decline. Charity is a type of food guidance that increases people's awareness of poverty and encourages them to share their food with others.

It is true that religious people often use charity to gain legitimacy and new members. It is also true that religions themselves are frequently the cause of poverty and food shortages due to their ideologies, the wars they generate and support, and their stance on contraception. And it is true that religious food charity can have a negative impact on a receiving country's economy. Still, it is fair to say that in many instances, religious people work hand in hand with those striving toward a more sustainable food system, recognizing that food charity is only one step on the road to poverty reduction.

Special religious occasions

Religion is reinforced through celebrations, and those special occasions are frequently anchored in food. The taste, smell, look, touch, and sound of food are all intrinsic to major religious festivals.

Religious people in every part of the world often grow up attaching certain foods to each festival they celebrate, and to special days that mark their weeks and months. The foods vary, to be sure, and as people move through their life cycle or migrate to other parts of the world those

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[5] As Alicia Sliwinski reminds us, "a disaster is about the human failure to adequately manage risks" (2018, p. 9). People are always implicated in widespread hunger that results from "acts of God." Her study, an ethnographic analysis of the work of aid organizations in the immediate and extended aftermath of a series of earthquakes that hit El Salvador in 2001, includes an examination of the role of a group of Catholic nuns in addressing basic human needs, including hunger (see esp. pp. 64–75). The result is a nuanced critique of food charity.

foods can also change, but the turkeys, the jalebis, the bread, the couscous, the strawberries,[6] the rice, and the meat stews, for example, are almost always central to the celebration.[7] Here is one example, presented by Chitrita Banerji, a food writer who grew up in Bengal and now lives in the United States:

> Whenever I think of the autumn festival of Durga, and of the subsequent ones honouring the goddesses Lakshmi and Kali, I am overcome by the aroma of hot, puffy *luchis* (deep-fried puffed bread), of *alur dam* (slow-cooked spicy potatoes) nestling in a glistening, dark, tamarind sauce, of golden *chholar daal* (yellow split peas) spiced with cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and cardamom, its thick texture flecked with tiny coconut chips fried in *ghee* (clarified butter). The richness of meat cooked in a fragrant, spicy sauce extends pleasure to the edge of sin. My tongue wraps itself around the cool memory of a rice pudding made with milk evaporated to a rich, pinky-brown creaminess and combined with fragrant *gobindabhog* rice, crushed cardamom seeds, and pistachio morsels. (Banerji, 2006, p. 5)

Recipes like this abound, and for the most part people find ways to adapt their treasured recipes to fit changing times and places. If ground veal is no longer available for that Christmas meat pie, or if a cook no longer wishes to use veal in their cooking for ethical purposes, a replacement is chosen, and the celebration goes on.

Moreover, after talking with people across the world about the foods they prepare for special religious occasions, one thing stands out: the need for traditional food items that come as close as possible to those used in previous years. People are often passionately concerned about specific tastes and textures, and cooks want to reproduce them. Some tastes of childhood you never forget. In the words of Margaret Visser, "Food is tradition, largely because a taste acquired is rarely lost; and tastes and smells which we have known in the past recall for us, as nothing else can, the memories associated with them" (Visser, 1991, p. 29). Lily Cho (2010) makes a similar point regarding Chinese immigrants to Canada, arguing that the Chinese diasporic community is constituted not in history, but in memory, by which she means memory of tastes, with Chinese food and the small-town Chinese restaurant as productive of Chineseness in diaspora.

Not only are grandmothers brought into discussions at these times of the year, but people seek out specific foods and spices. Cooks distinguish themselves from others by relatively minor things items and practices. Having access to these spices, flours, rices, meats, and fishes now

[6] Lina Sunseri (2011), noting Oneida and other Haudenosaunee First Nations customs, says: "Strawberries are women's medicine, our responsibility.… For example, when we need some healing, physical or emotional, we eat them. Also, we are responsible for them, so we make strawberry juice for ceremonies, for everyone in the longhouse to drink" (pp. 130–131).

[7] For an example of how food practices in well-established religious festivals can change over time and across cultures, see Piercy (2007).

requires a well-honed global food chain, including the ongoing availability of these products. There are countless stories of people travelling with suitcases full of products from their homelands to recreate traditional dishes in their new host context (Sutton, 2001; Brown, 2017; Kershenovich Schuster, 2015).

Here is where the intersection with critical food guidance can be the strongest. It is in everyone's interest to link food to place, ensuring that traditional foods continue to be grown, in soils that give them the flavour of old. This is a global challenge that engages religious people, where they grew up and as they become part of global migrations.

Part 2: The role of religion in critical food guidance

The first part of this article reviewed some of the main ways in which food and religion intersect, touching on possible points of relevance when thinking of critical food guidance. This second part explores that relevance in a broader context.

A key aspect of critical food guidance is people's willingness to make changes to their food habits that might not directly benefit them. Meat might taste delicious, for example, but are people willing to curtail or completely remove meat from their diets when they discover the frightful ways in which most animals are treated before they become food for humans, or how much water it takes to raise a cow and how much greenhouse gas that cow produces? In addition, food might be cheaper at Walmart or on Amazon, but are people willing to pay more to support local farmers or to buy organic because that farming technique does more to keep the soil healthier for future generations? Changing our diet to benefit other living creatures and the planet itself, especially when that change hurts (the pocketbook, our eating culture, etc.), is not likely to have a high buy-in rate. Think about how hard it is to move people away from high fuel consumption vehicles, or to tax carbon in Canada, and how difficult it has been during the COVID pandemic to convince all people to act for the greater good.

The question I would like to pose here is one I raised in Part 1 of this article: Are religious people primed to make those tough changes, given the role that food already plays in their religious lives? My answer is yes.

Let me start with broad brushstrokes. My most important support for this claim that religion can be a fruitful nurturing ground lies in the general nature of religion itself, not in any of its food-related activities and beliefs. Here is the key issue (a generalization, to be sure, but still representative): inherent in religious belief is the view that people are part of something larger and more important than themselves. Even in situations where this belief makes people central (e.g., the biblical story that God created humans as his preferred creatures and gave them dominion over every other creature), many religious people still situate themselves within a broader, more significant cosmic structure that wields power over them. People are constrained, religion often argues, by more powerful forces and by expectations on how we can and should act.

I see this fundamental religious viewpoint as wholly consistent with the responsibility to choose a diet that has a broader impact—on one's health in general, on one's community, and on the planet. This is not to say that religious people in general can be expected to act for the greater good. My point is simply that they are suitably prepared to do so.

This core religious belief in something larger than oneself, something often unseen and untouchable, extends to religious food guidance, as I have noted already. A religious practitioner imagines their deity telling them: "You want to eat meat because it's delicious? Think again if you want your body to be optimally prepared to meditate. You want your prayers to reach me? Then obey what I tell you when it comes to eating pork and other meat that's not been properly slaughtered. You want help in attaining a particular goal? Then show me you're worthy of my help by restricting your diet." In other words, the religious mindset, by its very structure, sets up external constraints on people's food practices, and offers short- and long-term incentives for making personal changes.

Additional support for the claim that some religious people are primed to make dietary changes based on concerns for broader environmental, economic, and social realities is that their religion has already motivated them to adjust their diets for religious reasons, as discussed in Part 1. Adjusting one's diet for other reasons—because of our obligations to others—can be a natural next step, more so when what is already being constrained for religious reasons fits nicely into a more secular context. Not eating meat for spiritual reasons, as a Hindu, a Jain, or Buddhist might do, is certainly not far removed from the argument that food production globally would be more sustainable if people ate less meat. Even in cases where the food link is not so obvious—for example, in situations where people are used to restricting their diets to curry favour with a deity—the very practice of restraining oneself from eating otherwise delicious food, as I noted earlier, is naturally extendable to issues relating to critical food guidance. In short, if I were promoting the notion of critical food guidance to various groups, religious people would most certainly be a core part of my target audience.

To be sure, there are limitations to the picture I have just drawn. First, the long-term goal of religious people has traditionally been focussed on the individual, not on the sustainability of the planet and the other animals within it. Why follow the sometimes-stringent demands of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá'í God? To reap an eternity of rewards for oneself after death. Why restrain one's natural dietary urges and thus meditate with a clearer mind? To reincarnate in a better state and speed up the process of ridding oneself of the material world. Moreover, many religious ideologies have separated people from animals. They have not tended to recognize humans as one type of animal among others. Religion, in short, has internal complications and shortcomings when it comes to caring for the planet and other creatures in it.

Second, what people will do, or believe, when they belong to a religious group is unpredictable. Ideals are one thing; lived reality can be quite different. For example, the majority of Jews in North America who self-identify as religious do not adhere closely to the kosher laws

of their religion.[8] Similarly, most Hindus and Buddhists are not strict vegetarians, and second-generation Muslims whose families emigrated to Canada from Muslim-dominant countries are less likely to be constrained by their religion's food directives than their parents were back home. As with so much else in religion, there is a large degree of variation in both practice and belief within each group. Indeed, the lived religion we encountered in our fieldwork rarely aligned perfectly with textbook versions of people's religions.

Third, not all religions impose, or recommend, permanent or temporary food restrictions, and food-related components of religion are in general less pronounced now than they have been over the past centuries. In fact, although one should not conclude that Protestant Christians in general have no religious connections to food,[9] they often self-identify on the food front by saying that *they* do not have food restrictions, and *they* do not fast.[10] It is also less and less common for Roman Catholics to restrict their diet for religious reasons. Catholics, members of the world's largest Christian group and the largest religious group in Canada, used to distinguish themselves from Protestants by abstaining from meat on Fridays, and fasting for 40 days before Easter by removing one or two food treats during this period. Nowadays, Fridays for Catholics tend to come and go like all other days of the week, and pre-Easter (Lenten) fasts, when practised, are typically less food-centric than before.

In general, then, those who are religious in Canada tend to feel less and less pressure from their religious community to alter their eating. Several generations ago things would have been different. Currently, the religious link to food is more apt to be found in meals for special occasions, charity, and especially the eucharist, which many of them do not even imagine as a food ritual.[11]

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[8] The 2013 Pew Research Center Study entitled "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" concludes that only about 22 percent of American Jews keep kosher in their homes. That percentage would be even lower for food eaten out of the home.

[9] For an overview of the intersection of food and (mainly) Protestant religion in America see Sack (2000). See also Hicks (2014) for an entry point to African American foodways that focus on Protestant Christianity. Note too Cathy Campbell's book (2003), which describes how the author, an Anglican priest (and former university professor of nutrition), led her Winnipeg parishioners to a deeper understanding of food justice issues, transforming her church's worship context in the process. Jennifer Ayres' book (2013) comes closest to describing the intersection of food and Protestant Christianity in America in ways that are amenable to critical food guidance.

[10] This data comes from the dozens of interviews I have done with Protestants and the hundreds that my students have conducted with them over the last decade as part of their course requirements. There are notable Christian exceptions, including the Seventh-day Adventists, started by Ellen G. White, who advocate a vegetarian lifestyle (1938).

[11] This Last Supper, or Eucharist, ritual, enacted in most Christian churches, remembers the last supper that Jesus is said to have had with his closest colleagues just before he died. For centuries Christians remembered that event by meeting over an actual meal, repeating the words attributed to Jesus at that meal. Over time, the meal shrunk to a loaf of bread and some wine; these items are still presented in Orthodox Christian gatherings. Then it shrunk further. Catholics now typically commemorate that event by receiving a small, round, dried unleavened wheat wafer, sometimes accompanied by a taste of wine. This ritual is so far removed from an actual meal, and the wafer from actual food, that most Catholics do not imagine their most primary ritual as a food event, i.e., a food offering.

That said, the limitations expressed in the second part of this article—that religion on the whole is still more about "me" than "we," that lived religion sometimes bears little resemblance to "book religion," and that the food constraints reflected in several religions that could have primed the pump for broad discussions about food systems and the like are in sharp decline—do not invalidate the important role that religion can and does play on the global food front. Most expressions of religion encourage respect for the world outside our individual selves and for the transformative power of food. Religion can, indeed should, be an ally in discussions that encourage transformative changes to the way people engage with food, with each other and with the planet.

Part 3: Creative examples of religious food guidance

I promised you chocolate ganache in this concluding part. It comes in the form of examples of the positive role that religion not only can but does play in changing food habits.

Let me start with food waste. Wasting less of the food we grow, buy, and eat would go a long way toward reducing our carbon footprint, among other things. In many of the interviews we conducted, the equivalent of *thou shalt not waste food* and *thou shalt not overeat* came up time and time again, by practitioners of various religions.

Rachel Brown's 2016 doctoral dissertation, grounded in her fieldwork that examined the multi-faceted role that food plays in the lives of Muslim immigrants to France and Québec, underlines this point, among many others. In the interviews she conducted with North African Muslim immigrants to Montreal one theme that emerged was food waste. "In our religion waste is forbidden," one of her informants told her. "We tend to always keep in mind that other people are dying of hunger…and that we shouldn't waste food" (my translation). Brown (2016) goes on to say, in the same paragraph: "many of my informants still saw this as an essential food practice that separated them, that marked them as Muslim" (p. 304). While food insecurity for immigrants to our country is quite real, the comments by these Montreal Muslims help us to appreciate that some of them, at least, are leaders when it comes to recognizing and reducing food waste.

The following examples are taken from Aldea Mulhern's 2017 doctoral dissertation, the result of several years of fieldwork in Toronto's Jewish and Muslim communities. Other examples abound from practitioners of different religions, across the world.[12] She highlights

[12] For Jains see http://www.jainvegans.org/2012/11/food-ethics/; and Chapple (2006), arguing that some modern forms of Jainism re-interpret their tradition to enhance human-earth relations. Regarding Buddhism, the global practice of "Engaged Buddhism" has had the greatest impact on the food movement, reinforcing mindfulness for the planet. In that context, the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh have been the most instrumental. Consider the following quote from one of his writings: "In Buddhism, the most important precept of all is to live in awareness, to know what is going on. To know what is going on, not only here, but there. For instance, when you eat a piece of bread, you may choose to be aware that our farmers, in growing the wheat, use chemical poisons a little too much. Eating the bread, we are somehow co-responsible for the destruction of our ecology. When we eat a piece of meat or drink

Shoresh, a not-for-profit Jewish organization based in Toronto: "Shoresh inspires and empowers our community to take care of the earth by connecting people, land, and Jewish tradition. Through nature-based Jewish education, healthy food production for vulnerable community members, environmental action, and sustainable Jewish products, we offer community members meaningful opportunities to be responsible stewards of the world around us" (Shoresh, 2020).

This kind of approach could come directly out of a manual on critical food guidance. To be sure, Shoresh emerges from a long and distinguished lineage of politically Left-leaning Jewish groups in this country and a highly educated Canadian Jewish population. Still, one should certainly not discount religious engagement with food that can be a good predictor of interest in broader food guidance.

My second example comes from several sources. It refers to a growing trend among North American Muslims to insist not only on halal but on healthful food, with "healthful" including locally grown, non-GMO, hormone-free, and organic.[13] Some Muslims go so far as to make an argument for vegetarian and vegan lifestyles that, they claim, are demanded by Islamic traditions given the nature of food production in the world today. Illustrations include an upscale butcher in Manhattan called Honest Chops (with its "honest to God" guarantee[14]), and a social enterprise called Saffron Road, a halal food brand that also embodies ethical consumerism: organic ingredients with no GMOs, no artificial ingredients, and no antibiotics.

Lest those examples seem idiosyncratic, Mulhern reminds us that one finds the same principles pursued in more traditional Muslim settings. The Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto is one instance. In addition to serving the Muslim community in ways that one would expect (children's education, marriage services, adult spirituality, and the like), this Centre also has "food-related programming that actively connects religion with alternative foodways," advocating "for more 'conscious' food practices, including local, organic, sustainable, humane, and social-justice-oriented food choices" (Mulhern, 2017, p. i).

These Muslim examples are both surprising and not surprising. Religious sensitivity to food in general helps, as I noted earlier; so too do the permanent and temporary food restrictions

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alcohol, we can produce awareness that 40,000 children die *each day* in the third world from hunger, and that in order to produce a piece of meat or a bottle of liquor we have to use a lot of grain. Eating a bowl of cereal may be more reconciling with the suffering of the world than eating a piece of meat. An authority on economics who lives in France told me that if only the people in Western countries would reduce the eating of meat and the drinking of alcohol by 50%, that would be enough to change the situation of the world. Only 50% less" (Hanh, 1987, p. 65).

[13] Contemporary Muslims who argue that meat-eating runs counter to the deepest Muslim ideals are not the first to make this argument, or to recognize that a new appreciation of vegetarianism among Muslims will take time. See the review of opinions in Folz (2006), and also Ali (2015).

[14] Their honest to God "guarantee" from their website reads as follows: "1 SOURCING We promise that all animals that enter Honest Chops are ethically-raised: no steroids, growth hormones, arsenics, or antibiotics—ever. 2 PROCESSING We promise that our meat is hand-slaughtered following Islamic guidelines. 3 DIGNITY We promise to pay our workers (butchers, drivers, managers) dignified wages. 4 TRANSPARENCY We promise to give you annual updates on our suppliers and local supply chains. 5 BUILDING COMMUNITY We promise to always try our hardest to provide meat and cooking supplies from local farmers and artisans. 6 CONSISTENCY Most importantly, we promise to always be honest and transparent to our stakeholders—you."

found in Islam, which prepare Muslims to think seriously about food. Many younger Canadian Muslims are as concerned, if not more, with the health of the planet as their non-Muslim friends. Add their religious food sensitivities and you have a potent mix.

In closing, what we see in these Jewish and Muslim examples are clear, unambiguous instances of religious people critically engaging the food they eat—as Koç et al. (2017) note, examining evidence, unearthing values, questioning power, and encouraging social change. Despite the unpredictable nature of religious responses in general, it is not by chance that the Jews and Muslims we encounter here advocating for healthier food that is respectful of the environment, workers, animal welfare, the local economy, and their God's wishes, should be members of two religious groups that practice strong food guidance. Religion matters, with these groups and others, in supporting and generating new approaches to eating, and engaging constructively with the world.

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