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Soul Food

**From Buddhists to Sikh to Jews,
 food takes on religious meaning.**

How are food and religion connected? *EW* spoke to local religious centers, and some scholars, including Katherine Ulrich, a DePauw University professor who teaches a course called "Diets and Deities: Food Themes in World Religions," to figure out whether fasting is a common way for people to express their faith.

A fascinating variety of food practices have emerged across the religious spectrum. In some traditions, controlling your food serves as a form of self-purification and penance for past sins (see last week's cover story on Ramadan). In others, staying away from all food, or certain kinds of food, becomes a way to get closer to God or to show solidarity with the poor.

Jainism, for example, places such importance on nonviolence that "even eating a vegetable is an act of violence" that attracts bad karma, says Ulrich. Monks and nuns frequently sweep their own paths to avoid stepping on insects. Some clergy too old to carry out their duties may even fast themselves to death as a way to atone for their accumulated bad karma.

Sikhs, however, do not believe in fasting for spiritual purposes. But they do restrict their diet: They eat no meat, and like Muslims, disapprove of mind-altering substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Sikhism emphasizes sharing meals as a way to promote community. "We like to mention in our history that when a beggar and a king came to the same court, they would eat the same meal before they met the guru," says Sat Ganesha Khalsa of the Eugene Sikh Gurdwara.

Despite the image of the starving Buddha, fasting is not a Buddhist practice either. The Buddha fasted so strenuously he almost died, says the Rev. Oswin Hollenbeck of the Eugene Buddhist Priory, before realizing that such extremes were unnecessary in order to become enlightened. "I don't say this in judgment of any tradition, but for us, we found that not to be helpful," he says. Food is considered essential for the pursuit of spiritual success, as long as one neither denies nor indulges oneself in extremes. "The human body is our vessel and vehicle of our practice. We must not mistreat it or punish it in any way," says Hollenbeck.

Buddhists say food is considered essential for the pursuit of spiritual success, as long as one neither denies nor indulges oneself in extremes.

Less drastically, Jews also fast to repent for sins committed against God on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Believers go without food or water for 24 hours from sundown to sundown, often wearing white to signify purity. This also marks a time to ask fellow beings for forgiveness for any sins you've committed against them, says Deborah Green, UO professor of religious studies. And Tisha B'av, a fast on the ninth of the Jewish month Av, is held in memory of the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem.

One of the five "minor fasts" in Judaism revolves around the story of Esther, the Jewish queen credited with saving her nation. Esther ate nothing for three days to purify herself before going to the king — who knew nothing of her religion — to ask him to reverse his command for all Jews to be killed. In memory of Esther's bravery, Jews fast before the holiday of Purim and then feast to celebrate their survival. Purim is also the only holiday Jews are commanded to get drunk!

Hindu women will often fast for 24 hours to ask for blessing for the men in their family or their children, Ulrich says. Unlike Ramadan or Jewish fast days, which follow prescribed times, the fasts of Hindu women usually follow an individualized schedule depending on the deity to whom they pray.

Many Native Americans pursue a spiritual vision of clear understanding, usually under the guidance of an elder, through a process that includes fasting from all food and drink.

Some Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians and other Christian groups may observe 40 days of Lent, a time of personal reflection and repentance in preparation for Easter, when fasting usually means avoiding meat or other forms of self-indulgence.

"Food is a good way to feel like you're controlling a lot of things," says Ulrich, because although we can't stop breathing or sleeping, we can stop eating for a while: Giving up certain foods for good, or all food for a short time, can help express one's spirituality. **EW**

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