

1 Introduction

In an era of globalization, it is hard to name a meal more well-known around the world than the Big Mac. McDonald's iconic burger features two hamburger patties, a slice of American cheese, lettuce, pickles, onions, and the eponymous "Big Mac Sauce." The United States sold over 560 million Big Macs in 2007 alone, or 1.86 burgers for every one American (ABC News, 2009). While practically synonymous with McDonald's, the Big Mac is not present in all of the 40,000 stores operating internationally. What could drive this mega-corporation to abandon its iconic sandwich?

Religion. Approximately one in every three McDonald's in Israel adheres to *kosher* principles, which forbid the combination of meat and dairy products. In North India, the Big Mac – and any beef or pork products – are missing entirely from the menu, replaced with chicken and veggie burgers. McDonald's in Pakistan can also assure customers that their Big Macs contain *halal* meat, slaughtered and prepared in line with the Islamic tradition.

Food is a critical part of our daily lives and affects how we think and feel (Cohen et al., 2016; Gómez-Pinilla, 2008; Rozin et al., 2019). For humans, selecting what to eat is not an inherently simple task, given our wide diet and complex social norms (Pollan, 2010; Rozin, 1976). By some estimates, we make over two hundred food-related decisions a day (Wansink & Sobal, 2007) and it is easy to see how. At a standard US McDonald's, consumers must choose between nine different hamburgers – not to mention the accompanying side, drink, and their respective sizes. And these decisions come only after deciding to eat, driving to that McDonald's and debating whether to go through the drive-thru or go inside. All of this, for one meal.

Religion is a powerful guide in the decision of what to eat. For example, many religions possess rules for what (not) to eat, resulting in broad systems like *halal* or *kashrut* for adherents to follow. Religions also provide guidance on how to eat – only after sunset or always before? in a community or alone? with a blessing before, after, or both? However, the relationship is bidirectional; food also plays a role in constituting religious experiences. A description of Ramadan would be incomplete without mentioning fasting. Consumption of the consecrated bread and wine as part of the sacrament of Holy Communion has been a defining (and distinguishing) feature of Christianity since its inception. Hindus and Shintoists leave elaborate spreads of food for gods at temples and shrines.

Our goal in this Element is to discuss religion and food. First, it is important to define what we mean by religion. Defining religion is notoriously difficult; to do so is to take "a wanton risk of intellectual confusion" (Nash, 1913, p. 1;

Streng, 1972). To begin, Merriam-Webster defines religion as “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.” When people think of religion, they likely call to mind one of these “institutionalized systems” such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, or Judaism. Indeed, in this Element, we will also focus on these major world religions as they represent the bulk of extant research on food and religion. However, William James preferred to focus on “personal religion” rather than institutional component, defining religion in his lecture series on the topic as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1902). But other scholars, such as Durkheim (1915) and ourselves (Cohen, 2009; Wormley et al., 2023), include the institutional component in their definition of religion.

In acknowledgment of the multidimensional nature of religion, the four dimensions of religiosity model proposes that religion can be understood as spanning four dimensions: cognitive, moral, emotional, and social (Saroglou et al., 2020). In other words, religion consists of:

1. beliefs: the doctrinal claims about the nature of reality, especially as they pertain to life, death, and the existence of deities.
2. values: the guiding moral principles of a religious group which motivate thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
3. practices: the ritual behaviors of a religious group.
4. community: the identity, roles, and institutions that bind adherents into a religious in-group.

We use these four dimensions as a framework for guiding our discussion of the role of food in religious life, as it covers much (but certainly not all) of religion.

Further, it is important to recognize that religious life is incredibly diverse, but current scholarship is concentrated on the world’s major religions, especially Christianity. This bias is further compounded by the fact the psychology of religion has largely used Western samples so even our findings about well-researched religious groups may be skewed by the broader culture they are embedded in. For example, though we know quite a lot about American Christians, our understanding of, say, Korean Christians and how Korean culture intersects with Christian culture is lacking. Thus, in addition to limited information on smaller religious groups, we will also not be able to fully capture variation in religious life *within* these groups. As a result, we avoid making statements about food and religion writ large and acknowledge that there will always be exceptions to some of the claims we make within this

Element. This diversity in religious life is what makes the study of religion both fascinating and complex.

Despite the important and diverse role of food in religious and secular life, the intersection of religion and food has gone relatively understudied. In a chapter on the matter, Corrie Norman points out that much of the literature on religion and food tends to focus on religious food taboos with scholars being “more fascinated with fasting and forbidden food than with calorie-laden religious foodways” (Norman, 2012, p. 410). However, the role of food in religion is far more complex. As Kaori O’Connor (2008, p. 152) writes, researchers “have long recognized that food is not just feed . . . Both symbol and substance, food embodies history, memory, tradition, invention, place, diaspora and cultural values, and reflects both continuity and change.”

The goal of this Element is to provide an overview of the relationship between religion and food – beyond the study of “fasting and forbidden food” – and to capture how food embodies religion and its history. Ultimately, we hope to show that any description of religion would be remiss without exploring how it intersects with a critical part of life: eating. In each section, we discuss how food relates to the four dimensions of religion – beliefs (Section 2), values (Section 3), practices (Section 4), and community (Section 5). Within each section, we provide a brief description of that dimension then connect it to illustrative examples from fields such as psychology, religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. Throughout, we connect examples back to theories, such as cultural evolution and social identity theory. In the spirit of inspiring more research within this domain, we conclude each section and the Element as a whole with open questions for research (Section 6).

2 Beliefs

On November 11, 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council convened at the behest of Pope Innocent III. The agenda was full – in the next nineteen days, the Council would compose seventy-one papal decrees. These canonical laws covered topics such as nepotism (Canon 31) and an early description of the separation of church and state (Canons 42 & 44). The final canon would mark the start of the Fifth Crusade as June 1, 1217 (Duggan, 2011). But at the front of everyone’s minds was the problem of bread and wine – or was it the body and blood of Jesus?

The debate was over the particulars of a historical dinner. At the Last Supper, Jesus of Nazareth would sit His twelve disciples at a table and foretell of the remainder of His life. That night’s meal – unleavened bread (in alignment with

the Jewish tradition of Passover) and wine – would be the basis of a ritual of remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice: the Eucharist.¹

Twelve centuries after this dinner, a new generation of disciples would gather at the Vatican to debate precisely what happened in the moment a priest consecrated the bread and wine. The Book of Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Take and eat; this is my body. . . This is my blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:26-28). Did this mean that the bread and wine were the literal body and blood of Jesus? If so, what happened to the bread and wine? Was it destroyed? Could the bread coexist alongside the body? The Council would eventually decide that “His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God’s power, into His body and blood” (Macy, 1994; *The Fourth Lateran Council*, 1215). This declaration meant that “the Body of Christ” would simultaneously refer to three things: the literal body of Jesus Christ, the bread and wine that were consumed, and the community who partake of that body. Not everyone would agree with the Council’s decision and this process, known as *transubstantiation*, would be a cornerstone of on-going conflict between traditions of the Christian faith.

Beliefs around Holy Communion presented another conundrum for Protestants in the late nineteenth century during the rising temperance movement. Temperance had been pushed by the American Temperance Society which consisted largely of middle-class evangelicals (Rohrer, 1990). However, each Sunday, they were expected to partake in a small amount of alcohol. How could they reconcile their social beliefs about alcohol with their religious faith? The answer would be grape juice – a convenient and similar-enough alternative to wine. An entrepreneur would capitalize on this change, giving rise to a fruit juice empire – Welch’s. More recently, in 2003, the Vatican clarified that while gluten-free bread is insufficient for the practice, those with celiac disease may participate with only wine (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003). The ongoing conundrum of communion is just one example of how critically important food can be in understanding religious beliefs, the subject of this section.

Food lies at the center of many religious beliefs, the cognitive components of religion. Beliefs encapsulate what it means to be alive, what it means to be human, the purpose of one’s existence, and how that existence came to be. These beliefs form the basis of religious life, guiding the values, practices, and communities we will discuss later, and shape the secular world as well. The seemingly mundane – unleavened bread, figs, butter – can take on entirely new meaning when embedded within one’s religious beliefs. In this section, we

¹ *Eucharist* refers to both the ritual and the consecrated bread and wine, while *Holy Communion* refers to the action of receiving that Eucharist.

outline where food takes the spotlight in three themes of religious beliefs: stories about the world, social hierarchies, and the afterlife.

2.1 The Psychology of Beliefs

In an early treatise, William James (1889) described beliefs as “the mental state or function of cognising reality.” Today, we define religious beliefs as the guiding frameworks of a religion which outline answers to questions, especially existential questions (Saroglou, 2011). Many religious traditions provide answers to these, among other, questions:

1. How did humans come to exist?
2. Who should be in charge?
3. What happens after death?

With these answers, individuals develop a subjective truth about how the world works. Answers may be derived from religious texts, oral traditions, and one’s own synthesis. Religious beliefs may also be shaped by other cultural identities (Settles & Buchanan, 2014; Wormley et al., accepted in principle). For example, there are regional differences in the practice of Christianity, which reflect the blending of the religious tradition with local culture. This is especially apparent in the practice of Christianity within Africa, where imported Christian traditions were blended with traditional beliefs and practices extant in the region (“syncretism”). This has led to a proliferation of a unique form of Christianity that blends Pentecostal beliefs with traditional forms of worship and indigenous healing practices (Amenga-Etego et al., 2021; Fernandez, 1978; Meyer, 2004; Mofokeng, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2006). Even within the same church, cultural identities may clash. During fieldwork in one Chinese Catholic church in Boston, a scholar noted parishioners from Hong Kong and Fujian had largely isolated themselves from one another, adopting different practices within the parish (e.g., using their English vs. Chinese names; Xiong, 2023).

Beliefs form a fundamental basis from which individuals act upon the world. Thus, to properly understand an individual’s psychology, you must understand their belief system. A simple analogy can be drawn from political beliefs – an American’s decision to vote for a conservative political candidate makes sense if you know this person believes in limited governance, restrictions on abortion, and opposes affirmative action. In the same way, religious beliefs predict prosocial behavior (Johnson et al., 2016), coping strategies (Pargament et al., 1998), and self-control (Rounding et al., 2012), among other psychological outcomes.

In addition to helping us understand the individual, religious beliefs are critical to understanding differences between groups (Cohen, 2009). Beliefs surrounding communion represent a key difference between Protestantism and Catholicism – two religious traditions which are remarkably similar in their belief system. However, doctrine dictates that Catholics should believe in transubstantiation – the bread and wine *literally become* the body and blood of Christ. Yet, Protestants are generally taught to deny transubstantiation, even if they believe that Christ is somehow present in the Eucharist. As these two groups diverged on the basis of their beliefs, they developed different traditions and communities which further served to differentiate between the two groups and, in some cases, led to conflict.

Similar processes can be seen in other religious traditions. The *Sunni* and *Shia* traditions of Islam differ in their beliefs about how leadership should be passed on within the faith, how the faith will be revived by the *Mahdi*, and which *hadiths* should be followed. Reform and Orthodox Judaism differ in their beliefs about who wrote the *Torah*, how the *Torah* should be interpreted, how the *Torah* should be applied to life, and how Jewish practices should (or should not) be integrated with modern secular culture. The Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church famously split in 1054 along geographic lines – partially due to theological differences surrounding the use of leavened or unleavened bread during communion. Thus, diverging beliefs – including those regarding food – certainly play a core role in differentiating and dividing religions and individuals.

2.2 Myths

A critical component to many religions is holy texts: the *Qur'an*, the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, for example. These books outline the core beliefs of a faith and, often, the events that led to the creation of mankind, deities, and the religion. Being a part of daily life, food often appears in these texts as they describe what adherents should do, what early figures in the faith ate, or as easily accessible metaphors for describing complex spiritual phenomena (e.g., in Hinduism the universe was created by churning an ocean of milk; Mahias, 1987). The significance of food within a religion may be derived from their role in these texts. For example, of Jesus' dozens of recorded miracles in the New Testament, five had to do with providing food for others in times of need. The book of Matthew describes the miracle of the "Feeding of the Five Thousand":

And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into