

Food prohibitions in world religions

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Some foods have special meanings, like the bread and wine of the Christian Eucharist, and others must be prepared in very special ways, as for example the kosher rules for killing animals and cooking food in separate utensils. The reason why these rules are so important is that they have both literal usefulness in preserving the health of believers and symbolic usefulness such as forging unity between them in a potentially hostile world.

A recent review of the effects of religiously motivated food habits on health concluded that “ dietary restrictions, with the exception of strict vegetarianism (vegan diet) of most of the religions, might be substantially effective in preventing, treating or controlling a disease” (Sarri et al., 2006, p. 18). Clearly there is a good medical reason to avoid some meat and dairy products in hot countries, where these foods harbor disease. Interestingly, the same article points out that there are also psychological and social benefits in participating in these rituals, which supports the idea that it is not just avoidance of foods that are beneficial, but the way a whole religious community sets itself apart and binds itself together through its food-related rituals.

The very complex laws in Judaism have also another purpose, namely to show obedience to God and to ingrain self-control (Kashrut article). The same is true of the strict rules of Ramadan for Muslims. Clearly there are physical, moral and social reasons why food prohibitions are practiced in all major world religions and that is why they are so important.