



## Review

# Spiritual aspects of meat and nutritional security: Perspectives and responsibilities of the Abrahamic faiths



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## ABSTRACT

For devotees of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, food that does not meet standards of 'spiritual quality' in its production or preparation may be unsuitable for consumption. Regardless of availability and affordability, such food may as well be absent from the marketplace. Given that an estimated 55% of the world population is affiliated with these three Abrahamic faiths, the spiritual condition of food should be considered when measuring and assuring global nutritional security. A first step, and the aim of this article, is to raise awareness of the laws and customs that relate to the production, distribution and eating of food, with emphasis on the central role of 'meat security' in ancient and modern societies. Permissions and prohibitions stipulated in the Torah, Bible and Quran are described, along with interpretations and research from current literature. Religious customs have implications for modern methods of food production, particularly when meeting the needs of consumers who depend on Jewish kosher (fit or proper) and Islamic halal (lawful) meat supply. The on-going food security of these communities is at risk where local legislation and regulations restrict traditional practices such as religious slaughter of meat animals.

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## Contents

1. Introduction . . . . .	883
2. Global issues of food security . . . . .	883
2.1. Diverse views and definitions . . . . .	883
2.2. Meat security . . . . .	884
3. Spiritual perspectives on meat and nutritional security . . . . .	884
3.1. Judaism . . . . .	884
3.1.1. Source of laws in Judaism . . . . .	884
3.1.2. Allowed and prohibited foods . . . . .	884
3.1.3. Judaic teachings and practices affecting food security . . . . .	886
3.2. Christianity . . . . .	886
3.2.1. Source of laws in Christianity . . . . .	886
3.2.2. Christian teachings and practices affecting food security . . . . .	887
3.3. Islam . . . . .	888
3.3.1. Source of laws in Islam . . . . .	888
3.3.2. Allowed and prohibited foods . . . . .	889
3.3.3. Islamic teachings and practices affecting food security . . . . .	889
3.4. Commonalities . . . . .	893
4. Meeting the meat security needs of kosher and halal consumers . . . . .	893
4.1. Legislation and regulations . . . . .	893
4.2. Labelling of kosher and halal products . . . . .	893
4.3. Impact of social media . . . . .	894

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5. Conclusions . . . . .	894
Acknowledgments . . . . .	894
References . . . . .	894

**1. Introduction**

Spirituality is an important part of human life, and the impact of faith and philosophy in society extends to food security. This is because some religious doctrines guide the production and distribution of food, as well as the socio-economic and political factors associated with those activities. Their interdependence was observed by [Farb and Armelagos \(1980\)](#): “Food to a large extent is what holds a society together and eating is closely linked to deep spiritual experiences”.

From the point of view of the physical and social sciences, the key issues of food security revolve around availability, stability, access, and utilisation ([Garnett, 2014](#); [Schmidhuber & Tubiello, 2007](#)). That paradigm relegates religious concerns to the background. Yet, for the devout, food that does not meet the standards of ‘spiritual quality’ in its production or preparation is unsuitable for consumption, and may as well be absent from the marketplace. Given that an estimated 5.8 billion adults and children are religiously affiliated (see [Fig. 1](#)), representing greater than 80% of the world population ([Lugo, 2012](#)), it is prudent to include religious perspectives in the discourse on global food security.

The aim of this article is to raise awareness of the laws and customs of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that relate to the production, distribution and eating of food, with emphasis on the role of meat in ancient and modern societies. These three religions are considered Abrahamic faiths, because they trace their origin to a common spiritual father, the Prophet Abraham. The faiths believe that there is only one God, the All Knowing Creator, who provides the laws for righteous living through revelation to prophets, which are recorded in the scriptures. Within each religion, there are denominations and branches that differ slightly in their interpretation and implementation of the scriptural laws.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not the only religions with tenets regarding food production and consumption. Major faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism all address eating from a different perspective. There are also traditionalists, culturists and other ideologies that have their own beliefs. These deserve to be reviewed with respect to food security, an objective that other authors may wish to pursue. Here we have focussed on just the Abrahamic faiths, presenting their broad ideas rather than nuanced variations within each group, and highlighting their commonalities rather than their contrasts. We then briefly discuss implications for modern food production, particularly

the legislative and popular culture responses to religious slaughter of meat.

**2. Global issues of food security**

*2.1. Diverse views and definitions*

Food security is viewed and defined in many ways, although its aim is simple enough: sufficient food of a suitable kind at the right time and place for as long as necessary. Complexity arises when this is put into socio-economic contexts to do research and make policy.

- The modern definition of food security dates back to the World Food Summit of 1996. It exists “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. As this commonly refers to calories, the term ‘nutrition security’ is sometimes used to capture the quality dimension.
- Food security is often characterised in terms of supply-side attributes such as availability, stability, access, and utilisation. However the true challenges are multidimensional. For instance reliable delivery of adequate food to a marketplace means little to people living in areas so remote that they are effectively disconnected, or for the poor who have insufficient monetary and nonmonetary resources to exchange for food ([FAO, 2014](#); [Garnett, 2014](#); [Godfray et al., 2010](#); [Schmidhuber & Tubiello, 2007](#)).
- Researchers have tried to collapse the numerous supply- and demand-side issues into fewer manageable categories. [Keating, Herrero, Carberry, Gardner, and Cole \(2014\)](#) outlined three ‘food wedges’, which are pathways that target reducing food demand, increasing food production, and sustaining the productive capacity of food systems. Such classifications are useful for conceptualising but might be too simple to design policy on an international scale. For comparison, the EU’s consensus framework requires six overlapping sub-frames: 1) production, 2) environmental, 3) development, 4) free trade, 5) regional, and 6) food sovereignty ([Candel, Breeman, Stiller, & Termeer, 2014](#)).
- Perhaps complexity is to be expected when trying to describe and achieve food security; it is, after all, one of the fundamental



**Fig. 1.** Number of individuals who identify with religions worldwide. Each symbol represents 100 million people ([Lugo, 2012](#)). The symbol is enlarged on the right of the figure for readers to contemplate its design, beauty and Creator. “And all the beauty of many hues-which He has created for you on earth: in this, behold, there is a message for people who are willing to take it to heart!” ([Quran 16:13](#)).

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