

# Exploring The Relationship Between Food And Spirituality: A Literature Review

## Abstract

Spirituality is emerging as a novel research area throughout different subjects but being a highly subjective and controversial topic, it very often fails to deliver academically (McSherry and Cash, 2004). Spirituality, in the same way as food, is not merely about theories or concepts but is deeply embedded in the practical elements of life (Salonen, 2018). From that perspective, the conjoint area of research between food and spirituality is auspicious fertile land for new knowledge both for academics and practitioners. The general aim of this review is to synthesize current available literature on spiritual aspects of food consumption in attempt to find reoccurring themes and ultimately establish a useful definition for future research.

Keywords: Food Consumption; Spirituality; Identity; Cultural Food Practices; Wellbeing; Commensality.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction to Spirituality

The definition of spirituality does not appear to be a simple matter since much of the research is conducted based on terms and definitions defined by the authors themselves which can potentially cause academic miscommunication and bias (Gall *et al.*, 2011; MacDonald, 2011). In terms of spiritual existence, the consensus about the definition is severely inadequate due to rhetorical limitations of language and its structures (MacDonald, 2011; McSherry and Cash, 2004). Further, when analysing some taxonomies of spirituality from a philosophical perspective, there do not seem to be any universal principles underlining personal/individual understanding of the term (McSherry and Cash, 2004).

Historically, spirituality has been a sub-context of religion (Steinhauser *et al.*, 2017). However, recently the two domains have been separated (Jupp and Flanagan, pp. 24) and their historical link seemingly removed (Chirico, 2016). In these different approaches, spirituality is usually termed both religious and non-religious depending on an individual's personal beliefs (Gall *et al.*, 2011; Sheldrake, pp. 1; 13-17). Spirituality is highly subjective and extremely diverse because it deals with the fundamental essence that is human belief. Belief systems, religious dogmas and esoteric forms of spirituality are spread out and recorded across different cultures and civilizations in different timeframes establishing itself as a universal topic.

Throughout history, spirituality has been independently sought out by countless different cultures but has only recently emerged as a global research phenomenon in an intercultural context (Maryam, 2018). More people progressively believe that spirituality plays a role in their lives and growth of spiritual awareness can be noticed in academic disciplines (Jupp and Flanagan, pp. 23). Recent studies on spirituality suggest a great deal of benefits in a wide array of subjects, including health assistance and nursing (Kavosi *et al.*, 2018; Kaddourah *et al.*, 2018; Lorenzo, 2018), psychological treatment of various ailments (Jyothi and Sumesh, 2018; Oxhandler, *et al.* 2018), impacts on work environments (Walia and Nishtha, 2018; Nair and Sivakumar, 2018) and many other areas that are primarily concerned with overall individual wellbeing (Czekóová *et al.*, 2018).

The problems of defining spirituality appear to be persistent across disciplines, cultures and individuals. The lack of a universal definition (McSherry and Cash, 2004) and the ambiguity of the subject, however, almost creates a definition in itself. Based on an

assumption that the nature of existence is unknowable, a following inclusive description of spirituality is proposed (Senreich, 2013):

*“Spirituality refers to a human being's subjective relationship (cognitive, emotional, and intuitive) to what is unknowable about existence, and how a person integrates that relationship into a perspective about the universe, the world, others, self, moral values, and one's sense of meaning.”*

This inclusive definition best covers the epistemological problems conveyed by the term spirituality and is therefore chosen to be the regulatory principle when exploring the issues in this review.

## **1.2. Introduction to Food and Spirituality**

Food is a universal and a multi-dimensional aspect of human life, entailing psychological, physical to emotional features and is independent of any particular theories or subjective views (Pliner and Rozin, 2000). It is a highly philosophical topic that can be understood and explored from various different perspectives in terms of the most pragmatic and holistic approaches (Dirks and Hunter, 2013; Heldke, 2013). When it comes to research, food studies can cover an array of topics from physical to social sciences, humanities, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies, and even go deeper into specializing into very particular subjects (Albala, 2013; Miller and Deutsch, 2006). Both food and spirituality cover similarly wide grounds in terms of scope, subjectivity and research areas. The spirituality aspect of food has only recently started being explored in literature, and considering the number of articles published it becomes clear that it is a novel and an emerging research subject.

Food studies are best understood through a pragmatic perspective, because the philosophical questions begin in and loop back to the human problems that are faced every day (Heldke, 2013). Food is an integral part of any person's day to day life and the human diet is extremely compelling due to biological and social aspects of commensality (Chrzan, 2013). The pragmatic aspects of food can also be attributed to religion and spirituality and in literature can be found under the term of “lived religion”. Spirituality is not based on ideas or ideals but rather lived everyday practicality and in the same sense is related to food (Salonen, 2018). This provides a common ground area for both fields to be studied respectively through a lens of a symbiotic relationship.

Food is equally a key component to both hospitality and tourism, two industries that in recent years have been prominently growing into global economic influences. Spirituality as a research subject however, has only recently received some attention in the hospitality sphere; and is primarily based around workplace spirituality, service delivery and is mostly concerned with employee retention and sustainability (Gatling et al., 2016; Nicolaidis, 2016; Meletiou and Meylahn; 2016; Milliman et al., 2018; Hamed et al., 2019). An interest towards the direction of spirituality is still young and emerging; however, research in the hospitality industry, regarding both food and spirituality conjointly, is barely existent.

This conceptual paper, therefore, responds to calls for further research in the area (Okumus, et al. 2018), and in particular it aims to (1) analyse selected literature to find similarities and themes in dimensions covering the topics of food and spirituality; (2) provide clarity and establish understanding what food spirituality currently means, and (3) provide recommendations for further studies in the area of food and spirituality.

## **2. Materials and Methods:**

This section presents the methods used to develop the systematic literature review (Appendix A) using different inclusion and exclusion criteria. It then defines the approach used for analysing the selected literature. The following sections were particularly moulded according to a systematic review by Tan *et al.* (2013) due to the similarity between subjects. To gain a wider perspective on how literature reviews are conducted in general, methodologies of literature reviews from other research areas were looked at as well (Strozzi *et al.*, 2017; Liao *et al.*, 2018). However, taking into consideration that every one of these articles are entirely unique to their own purpose, the methodology for this review, as much as it is based on Tan's *et al.* (2013) model, is conceptualized for an inductive exploration for establishing themes and observing patterns.

**2.1. Search.** University's Library journal database was used to search for journals on conjoined topics of food and spirituality. Source types that were looked at were Academic Journal articles only. The keywords used and the differentiated areas of interest were both based on the provided definition of spirituality. The key term "OR" was used to distinguish each test result to yield maximum amount of results. Since the aim of the paper is to find consistency with the topics of food and spirituality, the following keyword combinations was used:

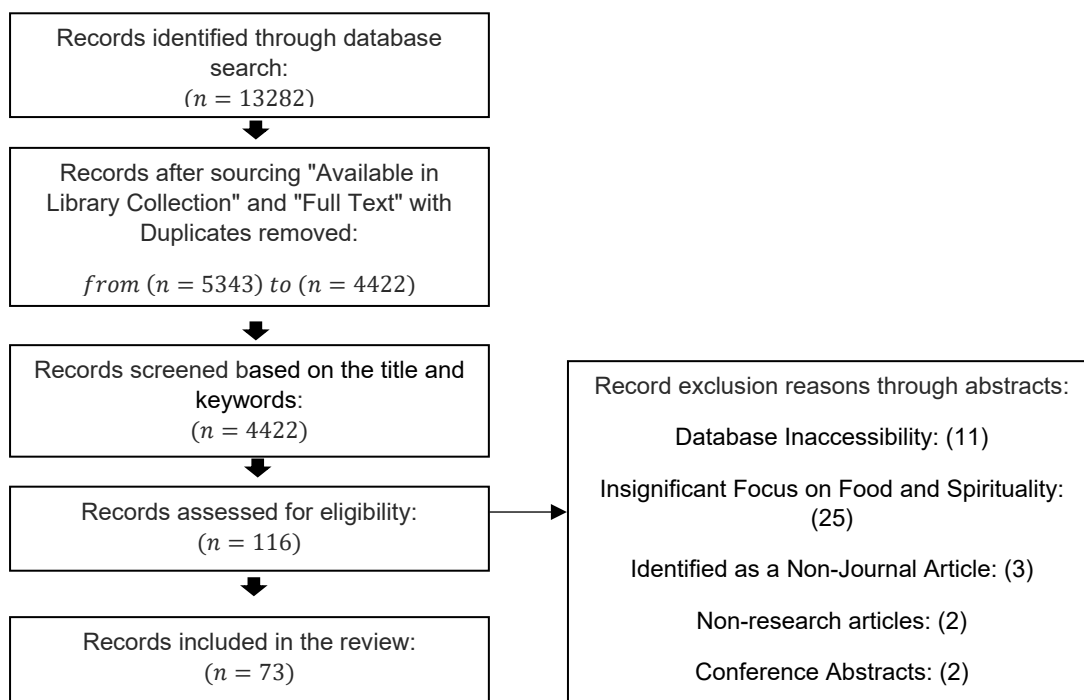
- (1) "food" "spirituality" "consumption"
- (2) "culinary" "spirituality"
- (3) "food" "spiritual" "consumption"
- (4) "culinary" "spiritual" "consumption"

2.2. *Inclusion.* The criteria for including a paper for eligibility assessment was as follows:

- (1) Due to the description outlined in the literature review and the particular aims of the paper, when searching for spirituality the forms and definitions that were included were: religious and non-religious spirituality, religious and meditation practices, anything to do with soul, transcendence and other forms of higher connection.
- (2) Its distinct aims were based on food consumption practices and various forms of spirituality.

2.3. *Exclusion.* The criteria for excluding a paper was:

- (1) The focus of the paper was not sufficient to establish a theme of spirituality and food.
- (2) Knowledge of the paper does not contribute to a contemporary understanding of food and spirituality.
- (3) Lack of institutional access resulting in inaccessibility.
- (4) Non-Research article, e.g. editorial note
- (5) Abstracts and introductions to various conferences.



*Table 1: Literature screening process*

The articles were then placed into a table and labelled by authors, title, journal, date and a brief summary of insights (Appendix A). The results will then be used in an analysis to find reoccurring themes and ideas regarding food and spirituality (Appendix B).

### 3. Results and Discussion

The analysis is conducted using an inductive exploration method by establishing themes. Since one of the aims is to piece together a definition of what meaning both food and spirituality provide conjointly, this specific method allows for an overlap between different literature sources. This is particularly useful due to the scope of both subjects covering such vast research areas. In a way it is also important to note that this pragmatic approach plays into the essence of nature of the topic. The analysis revealed 4 main thematic categories (*Food and Identity; Food and Outlook; Food Consumption, Wellness and Spirituality; and Food as A Way of Life*), each of which is broken down to subthemes as indicated in Table 2

<b>Main themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Food and Identity	– Individual Identity and Lifetime Narrative
	– Social, Organisational and Family Identity
Food and Outlook	– Connecting the Spirit, Environment and Commensality
	– The Transcendental Aspects of Dualism of Food
Food consumption, Wellness and Spirituality	– Wellbeing and Nutrition
	– Fasting
	– Alcohol and Spirituality
	– Eating Disorders, Body Image and Mindfulness
Food as a Way of Life	– Food, Spirituality and Economy
	– Spirituality, Customs and Cultural Food Practices

Table 2: Themes and subthemes of the literature

### 3.1. Food and Identity

#### 3.1.1. Individual Identity and Lifetime Narrative

Historically, food consumption played a significant role in an individual’s development of social and cultural identity, due to nourishment being a key aspect of biological and routinely everyday life. In medieval Europe, for example, people were defined by what they ate and food, or abstinence from it, was often used in various ways as cure for physical and spiritual ailments. Women shared the closest relationship to food, and the most prominent in kitchens were highly religious nuns (Callegari, 2018). Bynum (1985) argues that this was possibly because women were mostly in control of food as a resource and this allowed for a psychological outlet to seek control over one’s own life. Food asceticism was also one of the most highly revered qualities a saint could portray and that these practices were more central in women’s piety than in men’s. Fasting, asceticism and food handling are also closely linked to self-sacrifice which is a central idea in Christian theological traditions. Interestingly, both authors highlight the nourishing, caring and feminine aspects of medieval women and how these ideas acted as building blocks of their individual and religious identity. Looking at the subject from a spiritual perspective even Christ himself was influenced by the food rituals and traditions of his time that have shaped his character and understanding of the world (Desjardins, 2015).

Whenever individuals are brought to explore their held beliefs about food, it tends to be a very personal subject similarly to religion and one’s own spiritual views. Food

encompasses customs, family traditions, faith, connection to one's roots, history and spirituality (Chen and Shao, 2012; Pufall *et al*, 2011; Rouse and Hoskins, 2004) that all shape a person's individual identity and are held with great personal regard. Salonen (2018) has proposed an idea that religion is not about abstract ideas and ideals, but rather a function of everyday life carrying individual moral judgement and wisdom. The author linking this idea with food and how both religion and food can be understood synergistically through each other, shows how our eating choices and habits provide us with an identity from a deeply social and psychological context. The same idea can be found in Thompson's and McDonald's (2013) work where food consumption is explored as a possible outlet for symbolization and embodiment of social and cultural solidarity, both from an individual and a group perspective. Self-nourishment can be perceived as a medium for virtue in a spiritual context showing temperance, restraint and moderation (Thompson and McDonald, 2013). Food acquiring in the form of hunting was reported by Inuit to provide them with spiritual satisfaction of feeling self-sufficient (Chen and Shao, 2012). Rituals and practices concerning food consumption allows one to make choices and get closer to their heritage and religious traditions (Chen and Shao, 2012; Pufall *et al*, 2011; Rouse and Hoskins, 2004), which shapes and moulds them as an individual: "Eating is one form of creative activity in which subjects are allowed to make choices about what will come to constitute their very being, both corporeally and symbolically" (Rouse and Hoskins, 2014, p192).

Food links history and identity through their chronological aspects and personal significance. However, all three subjects can be synthesized to an idea of one's own lifetime narrative. Bone (2005) claims that food consumption is ritual and metaphor for both spiritual and soulful nourishment that we teach our children as rules from a young age. Breaking of bread is an important cultural and communal symbol that children learn as a very important part of their individual development. It is accomplished so through the formation of personal memories that everyone holds dear, they define us as individuals and provide essential building blocks for psychological growth. In terms of food imagery in literature the manifestation of these spiritual ideas can be attributed to a mother-child relationship that is defined by the early fundamental stages of nurturing (Naranjo-Huebl, 2007). This can also be interpreted through the Christian sacrament of communion as a form of redemption of another, where a woman is the primary symbolical source of food and nourishment. The idea is then carried out through one's own individual life as food is associated to the mother, the warming and social aspects creating a caring, kind atmosphere at home giving food a role of physical, psychological and spiritual nourishment (Naranjo-Huebl, 2007). The effects of food's role as a vessel of personal development follow an individual to the end of their life, where people undergo many changes including their relationship to food consumption (Allari,



2004). Some patients approaching death report severe loss of appetite that can potentially extend to starvation. Food was shown to have potential for cultural, social and spiritual comfort for dying patients, partly through their memories and deep connection to what they are accustomed. It is noted that these feelings are so strong and deep that objectively nutritional aspects of consumed food entirely lose their meaning (Allari, 2004). These insights infer that the food which we grow up eating and the traditions surrounding it, form our identity from the day we are born to the moment we depart, intermediately acting out as an auxiliary function for development accompanying us along our own personal narratives.

### **3.1.2. Social, Organizational and Family Identity**

Values that a person brings forth in their day-to-day existence define them, but a collective of these individual values defines a society. Consequently, it is not surprising that food capable of shaping the individual self is also partly responsible for social identity, and that can be seen universally throughout history. In Mayan times, food rituals held spiritual obligations and social relationships that facilitated communion when it came to “feeding” their spiritual entities (Morehart and Butler, 2010). According to Mount (1993) who studied Mayan spirituality, certain foods can depict the collective unconscious attitudes of different places in time. Likewise, in literature, food has been recognised as an expression of meaning and wellbeing through enjoying food with other spiritually oriented groups of people (Olivier, 2012). Johnson *et al.* (2011) identified different religio-cultural food practices as a means for building in-group identity, common rituals and as a way to communicate status through ingesting certain types and quantities of various foods. This is because food is known to symbolize and embody social and cultural solidarity that allows individuals to identify themselves with the food they consume (Thompson and McDonald, 2013). This, alongside religion, acted as building blocks for social structure and cohesion that formed food rituals and various holidays that guided the envelopment of human history.

When it comes to communal aspects as a spiritual dimension, it appears to manifest in people as different forms of felt connections. Acquiring food in various ways was evidently reported to help connect with the community, society and one’s cultural identity (Dennis *et al.*, 2017; Pufall *et al.*, 2011). As a practice, it is thought by some folk of Russian culture as the embodiment of the spirit of sociality (Caldwell, 2007). It has also been shown that food consumption practices are closely affiliated with religious neighbourhoods and communal aspects (Tan *et al.*, 2014). This suggests that smaller religious groups or just smaller groups in general have a higher affinity, to profoundly impact everyday life. This happens possibly because connection and relationality are more likely to occur in such communities, as unified

goals and beliefs are the foundational elements of groups. Rouse and Hoskins (2004) depict this idea vividly suggesting that food is prepared on different levels, and is not only there to satiate hunger but is also a religious duty and expression of love for god and community. They further argue that for the African American Sunni Muslim group as a minority in the States, food is one of the outlets for expressing religious commitments and for positioning oneself with their cultural history and heritage. This particular form of connectivity and self-alignment with such values carries significant potential when it comes to forming and maintaining sociocultural identity.

However, it could be argued that this identity building initially starts in the individual's early environment. In families, parents are the facilitators and first teachers when it comes to providing value structures. The importance of food as a family tradition is often understood and treasured more by the older folk (Chen and Shao, 2012). Nevertheless, the mother-child nurturing motif that aids individuality and personal development (Naranjo-Huebl, 2007) also helps to establish grounds on which an individual carries himself into the broader societal life from their infant stages. Certain symbolical food practices are also of great importance that most are usually introduced in family environments. Breaking of bread is a representation of communal eating that holds a way deeper meaning for most children to articulate but provides a subconscious awareness and understanding of such practices (Bone, 2005). Food in such ways can be positioned within a frame of a particular family's values and act as an extension to child upbringing. Parents that were identified to give their children more vegetables most commonly identified three core values: religion/spirituality, family and health (Beltran *et al.*, 2011). This can be interpreted as spiritual, social and physical wellbeing which in the wider context of a family is the desired outcome. The parents in this particular study recognised that feeding their children healthier foods made them feel better and in turn be kinder and more helpful towards other people (Beltran *et al.*, 2011). The implications of the literature strongly suggest how intricate and deep food consumption can be in a family framework and it seems to have a lot of potential as a research area for personality development.

When it comes to social factors, organizational spirituality cannot be overlooked. It seems evident how highly influential and interlinked spirituality and food are to each other with practices that build identity and faith that provides purpose and meaning creating incentive to stay healthy (Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2018). In this way religious communities are argued to hold significant potential when it comes to general health and wellbeing (Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2018). There are suggestions that clergy and religious leaders could in theory help to reduce the overweight and obese population by helping individuals in identifying their values, determining to what extent personal lifestyle choices are incompatible with said values and

hence providing incentive to change (Anshel and Smith, 2014). Naturally, not everyone is religious and a Buddhist foundation known as VERO provides an alternative to religious organizations and simply base their philosophy on mindful eating and interconnectedness of humans and their environment (Brummans *et al.*, 2016). In such ways spirituality is capable of extending its reach upon different practices regarding food and, at least in dietary matters, was shown to be highly effective (Tan *et al.*, 2014). Hence, it appears that religious and in other ways spiritual organizations can potentially provide incentive to change for the better in accordance to social and personal values when it comes to food.

## **3.2. Food and Outlook**

### **3.2.1 Connecting the Spirit, Environment and Commensality**

Consumption of food through times past developed into one of the most basic and literal ways for people to encounter God (Bynum, 1985). The idea was so practically and spiritually profound that with passing ages our perception of food advanced into one of the main symbols of God's grace as seen in the evolution of Christian religious literature (Feeley-Harnik, 1995). In the medieval times, for example, bread symbolized strength, vigour and was deemed as a holy, i.e. "wholesome", food. Receiving or having wheat bread was in the same spirit as being blessed by the heavens (Mount, 1993), while consumption of well-prepared food in literature was identified with earthly enjoyment and spiritual fulfilment in relation to the divine (Olivier, 2012).

In Hindu religious tradition certain temples offered food as an act of servitude to ensure collective prosperity of kingdoms (Rösel, 1983). Hindus as well as Mayans used rituals of food sacrifice to come closer to the gods as these offerings were deemed the most important rituals of appeasement (Morehart and Butler, 2010). Buddhist monks employed brewing and drinking of beer as a symbolic parallel to yogic meditation with the goal of achieving, as they refer to as, the state of Great Bliss of Emptiness (Ardussi, 1977). A more profound idea underlying this Buddhist practice is using the mundane to gain insight, establishing a relationship between the spiritual and the ordinary. The same could be argued for all the aforementioned symbols and rituals as food consumption was found to be more influenced by intrinsic motivation and inner connection to God than extrinsic utilitarian goals (Tan *et al.*, 2016). In essence, these ideas aim to acknowledge food as a means for highest form of connection between heaven and earth, soul and body, God and man.

Humans are social animals and we seldom eat alone, we engage in sharing of food and this connection is then established not only with the divine but also with one another in a form of commensality. The symbolic qualities of food as ritual have been identified extensively and the social aspect of eating cannot be understated. Family traditions and faith are often echoed in the literature as an integral part of spiritual aspects of food consumption (Chen and Shao, 2012; Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Rouse and Hoskins, 2004). Other factors facilitating communion between individuals were food sacrifice to the deities (Morehart and Butler, 2010) and simple enjoyment of food in company of spiritually oriented people as mirrored in religious literature (Olivier, 2012). Dell and Josephson (2007) found that religious and spiritual aspects of food, drink and communal meals greatly affect the emotional state of patients with eating disorders. Commensality can hence play a substantial role in one's own spiritual and psychological wellbeing, especially at times of distress. Even at the end of life patients manage to find social and cultural comfort in food and communal meals, which in a sense is one of the most sorrowful periods possibly conceived by an individual (Allari, 2004). Food connects people, be it family members or strangers, it re-affirms one's own personal and collective heritage of culture and tradition and provides a feeling of belonging in the immediate experience.

This feeling of belonging is not exclusive to interpersonal relationships; there is also a great deal of evidence of food connecting people with their environment. Throughout different cultures our spiritual ties to the natural have become an almost universal occurrence. In certain areas of Russia, spirituality seems to be linked with the philosophy of natural food and landscape environment that promotes "clean" eating (Caldwell, 2007). Food growth and gathering practices are thought to foster internal balance and harmony that is deeply embedded in the idea of "living off the land". Population of the Papua New Guinea reported how for their culture food represents growth-inducing properties, like the growing of a plant, by energizing and strengthening their relationship with the environment (Dundon, 2004). Some farms in Thailand have adopted Buddhist religious teachings to grow food organically, which provided farmers with better quality of life physically, mainly due to the lack of chemical sprays, but they also reported increased feelings of deeper connection to nature (Kauffman and Mock, 2014). The local Inuit in Labrador stressed the importance of their traditional food consumption and gathering practices partly because they provide spiritual connection to the land (Pufall *et al.*, 2011). This relationality appears to universally provide people with a very broad spectrum of potential positive emotions. Some have reported to have achieved a satisfying spiritual connection to nature through gleaning (Dennis *et al.*, 2017) while others do the same through practicing abstinence of meat consumption (Testoni *et al.*, 2017). For more sceptical individuals nature can be a much-

needed source of spirituality and emotion when overcoming particular eating disorders (Rodríguez-Martín and Gallego-Arjiz, 2018).

The potential for improvement is not only limited to persons as subjects, as the environment appears to benefit from it as well. Through the established spiritual connection with the environment and our immediate surroundings, people tend to care more and look after the land better. The farmers in Thailand have reported an increased biodiversity in their land (Kauffman and Mock, 2014) which may not seem like a lot at first, but taking into consideration their increased health, wellbeing and connection to nature it is safe to assume that these farmers are more likely to continue organic farming practices. This attitude promoted at a global scale could have a substantial impact on the environment. Bennet (2014) raises the issue in the same spirit, concerning global food wastage levels. The author argues that there is a disconnect between people and the value of their food which is linked to our environment and its perceived integrity. Even though science provides us with solutions to a lot of food problems, altering our behaviours in respect to food may play a vital part in the process (Bennet, 2014). Hence the spiritual and religious aspects of food and our complex connection to it should not be met sceptically, as not only it provides great individual or social benefits but also the most subtle changes in our attitudes may impact the planet on a global scale.

### **3.2.2. The Transcendental Aspects and Dualism of Food**

Food in religious texts is a reoccurring theme that is argued to be one of the chief signs of God's existence (Feeley-Harnik, 1995). Spirituality in general implies practical application and is overwhelmingly personal and subjective influencing our perceptions of everything from mundane to sacred. Every individual struggles with the fundamental questions of life-and-death (Feeley-Harnik, 1995) and we project these ideas and beliefs onto our foods. Many Buddhist traditions require their followers to follow a vegetarian way of eating to abstain from sin and killing (Hopkins, 1906; Sarao, 2008). Numerous subscribers to this philosophy report balance and improved quality of life (Nath, 2010). These ideas have also inspired many westerners to follow the same path and some report that this sort of behaviour promotes prayer, deification, purity and contact with the divine (Testoni *et al.*, 2017). The Christian ideas are likewise predicated under the assumptions that humans were created in God's image and some claim that thus we should strive for peace between all creatures (Suzworsky, 2001). To what extent creationism can act as a guide remains

questionable, however most agree that industrialized contemporary farming is an abhorrent practice that goes against Christian values and morality (Suzworsky, 2001; Massaro, 2017).

However, everyone eats and as creatures who cannot use sun and water as nourishment, we seem eternally condemned with the dilemma of taking life to sustain our own, be it plant or animal. Many other Buddhist traditions agree that life cannot exist without death, or in other words that creation requires destruction (Hopkins, 1906). According to this notion plants and animals contain the same amount of value as living entities and being a Buddha requires to embrace this as the universal law of suffering in nature to attain enlightenment (Sarao, 2008). This idea is predicated on Brahman thought, which suggests that plants are also sentient beings but simply exist on a different level of consciousness and sensory capacity (Hopkins, 1906). It seems that this understanding spurs from viewing life and death not as defining qualities of objective reality, but rather as a process of change and transformation. Just like plants transform sunlight and water into energy and so humans do the same with other life forms. However, it does appear that guilt following consumption of certain foods is very particular to both transcendental and moral axioms. On one hand lies a fundamental problem of taking a sentient life, which is forced upon us as a burden by our conscious awareness of our own mortality and limitation. This issue taken to its extreme is evasion of existential reality of the dualities and opposites that can result in striving towards divine self-sufficiency by completely abstaining from any form of food consumption (Nash, 2006). On the other hand, the morality aspect cannot be taken lightly as its absence can lead to over-materialization of other sentient creatures resulting in unbelievably cruel and unnatural ways of acquiring food through contemporary farming. As creatures of responsibility, it is us who need to find a way how to balance these axioms accordingly, in which spiritual cultivation and understanding could prove very effective.

### **3.3 Food Consumption, Wellness and Spirituality**

#### **3.3.1. Wellbeing and Nutrition**

Food is linked to our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Spirituality has also a relationship with nutrition from both religious and non-religious perspectives. Recently, this topic in particular has caught a lot of attention from researchers simply because people still rely on many traditional religious principles when it comes to food. This spurred interest to study such texts as Quran that offers conventional wisdom about making nutritious bread (Danesh *et al.*, 2017) and general dietary guidelines (Ghaffari, 2014). These texts appear to be rather vague and leave much room for interpretation like “consumption of pure food and

drink” yet sometimes offer indeed sound advice reminding people to keep basic hygiene, eat in moderation and to abstain from lavishing. In parenting practices, religion and spirituality, alongside health, have been found to be some of the core values that are tightly interlinked together (Beltran, 2011). This suggests that food choices are heavily predicated on belief and is most likely of great influence on early stages of personal development. Tan *et al.* (2014) in a review found that religious rules and doctrines can have positive effects on an individual’s dietary habits. It is important to note that some studies reviewed showed negative correlation between a healthy diet and church attendance. Another study revealed that food consumption was more influenced by inner determination and belief rather than doctrines (Tan *et al.*, 2016). These examples appear to suggest that many people may be using “going to church” as an excuse to avoid feelings of personal guilt about their eating habits. However, from the standpoint of doctrine one must either live in a culture where these rules carry a substantial cultural authority or actually be intrinsically motivated towards spirituality, or in some cases- both.

McIntosh and Shifflet (1984) found that people consistently participating in religious activities more often met their Recommended Daily Allowances and had higher meal regularity. Religious conservatism and religious disagreement were found to have less adequate diets. A different study showed that greater spirituality was related with moderation in terms of lower caloric intake, lower alcohol consumption and less likelihood of lifetime smoking (Reeves *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, Horton *et al.* (2018) found that highly religious people tended to be more stressed and therefore eat more unhealthy foods suggesting other potential variables in the equation. When it comes to strictly studying different religious groups there appears to be a significant difference in dietary intake. A study found that Adventists were more concerned with healthy eating than non-Adventists and also ate more fruits, vegetables and less fat (Tan *et al.*, 2013). Given the papers discussed here it is difficult to make a substantial claim to what degree dietary practices are determined by spirituality. Spirituality itself is multi-dimensional and food intake can indeed be heavily influenced by rules, doctrines and is different in various religious groups. Diet has been further affiliated with an idea of religious neighbourhoods and other various communal aspects (Tan *et al.*, 2014). This makes it difficult to determine to what degree spirituality affects an individual’s food choices and to what degree food choices are a part of a group identity that is consequent to spirituality. It appears that both elements are at play in accordance to everyone’s own cultural and spiritual upbringing which makes food a mediator of both social and individual wellbeing.

### 3.3.2. Fasting

Fasting has been a locus of spiritual communication and development and is recorded cross-culturally as a universal transcendental practice. From an anthropological perspective fasting is said to be used as achieving openness to God and movement of spirit (Feeley-Harnik, 1995). This was often performed in Christian tradition to cleanse sins in a form of penance by imitating Christ's suffering (Owens, 2011), and it was understood that Christ filled the spiritual sustenance left void by fasting. Hence food asceticism was naturally perceived as the most prominent quality a saint or someone of virtue and close to god could portray (Bynum, 1985). Feeley-Harnik (1995) argues that the fasting practices and other dietary prohibitions in religious texts merely show how closely spiritual beliefs were related to food and vice versa. In fact, fasting and an ascetic attitude towards food was a staple to the degree that it was used to communicate certain social statuses (Johnson, *et al.*, 2011). However, it appears that fasting has more to do with diet, wellness and weight control than spirituality in the modern times (Tamney, 1986). This shift in attitude is becoming more apparent and popularized in the current day of age. Many seekers of new age spiritual enlightenment have picked up this practice in attempts to attain pure immanence and godlike states of being (Nash, 2006). Nash (2006) claims that fasting is a double-edged sword that can also lead to dangerous pathological conditions and eating disorders; there seems to be a psycho-spiritual desire in some individuals to live without food in a form of narcissistic evasion of existential reality to strive towards divine self-sufficiency. Hence fasting appears to have evolved from being just an ascetic practice to now a more modern age campaign, with its own different forms and extremes, of individual self-development. However, it is hard to say with any certainty whether this was not the case in aforementioned religious practices throughout the ages, especially with so many different traditions, individuals and beliefs.

Even though traditional fasting has seen a shift in paradigm, many instances still remain where people adhere to these old religious practices. The intrinsic intentions that underlie these ideas have not changed much since their establishment; however research is still conducted in the field but through different lenses. Nutritional and health issues seem to be the main focus in the contemporary literature regarding the traditional fasting that some religious groups follow. For instance, nutritionists studying type 2 diabetes patients during their Ramadan fast found that patients prioritized fasting over health in pursuit of spiritual, psychological and social benefits (Almansour *et al.*, 2018). There have been reports of both adverse and positive health effects and results show an increase in self-efficacy between participants. This suggests that people even adhering to old traditions and customs can be socially and psychologically pressured into making poor health decisions. A similar situation



was documented in a study of patients with cardiovascular risks measuring different variables before and after fasting (Yousefi *et al.*, 2014). This particular paper, however, reported a positive change in most participants. The two studies suggest that there are indeed potential positive effects of traditional Ramadan fasting, however it also shows that people tend to adhere to these traditions with a substantial chance of disregarding their own health. From a dietary perspective, a study conducted on fasting followers of Eastern Christian Orthodox church exhibited better quality diets and showed no deficiencies in any micro or macronutrients (Lazarou and Matalas, 2010). This appears to have different results than a study performed on Ramadan fasters and their nutritional diversity. In this particular paper the assessed group was found to have a decline in dietary variety, eating more fruit than meat, dairy or vegetables. Both of these studies most likely indicate differences in religious understanding of fasting and food prohibitions. On another note it is also questionable since there is no clear consensus of what constitutes a healthy diet.

### **3.3.3. Alcohol and Spirituality**

Alcohol has played a major part in human history, (especially when it comes to religious symbolism, i.e. Christ's blood as wine), and is a highly controversial topic as in many religious traditions it is prohibited (Sheikh and Islam, 2018). Some studies have been conducted in attempts to link alcohol consumption and different religious denominations but seemingly to little effect as results suggest that states (Holt *et al.*, 2006) and ethnicity (Wechsler *et al.*, 1970) were more prominent factors. It has also been found that in general, religious people tend to drink less than non-religious people and is postulated to be exactly because of these prohibitory dogmas (Reeves *et al.*, 2012; Holt *et al.*, 2006). Quite ironically, however, some research suggests that the members of more restrictive religions used and misused alcohol significantly more than other groups, while religions with fewer restrictions showed no significant correlation in alcohol consumption (Bock *et al.*, 1987). This accepting attitude was likewise documented in certain Buddhist Tibetan monks who consumed beer as a symbolic parallel to yogic meditation in attempts to use alcohol pragmatically in achieving enlightenment (Ardussi, 1977). It does appear that religious people overall consume less alcohol yet it is not entirely clear what other variables are present and many studies for this reason acknowledge a myriad of limitations. If observed holistically from a wellbeing perspective, more spiritually devout people are prone to higher self-consciousness when it comes to health choices as discussed in previous subsections.

### 3.3.4. Eating Disorders, Body Image and Mindfulness

Studies being conducted on patients with various eating disorders show that for a lot of people their personal spiritual beliefs can be a great source of mental strength, stability, self-control, self-efficacy and an improved relationship to food in general (Burser *et al.*, 2014; Reicks *et al.*, 2004; Patel *et al.*, 2017). Many participants describe their recovery as a spiritual reconnection of the self to body, nature and society and eating disorders in general have been linked to a feeling of powerlessness and a lack of meaning in life (Maltusek and Knudson 2017; Rodríguez-Martín and Gallego-Arjiz, 2018). This seems to be a common theme throughout the literary landscape, as eating can be psychologically associated with strong emotions like guilt, shame, wellbeing and self-worth alike (Dell and Josephson, 2007). Consequently, in some cases many people turn to bingeing and overeating to fill the voids in their lives caused by the abundance of negative emotion, such as protest and anger suppression, and in religious people this was found to manifest in a form of a divine struggle and lack of belief (Exline *et al.*, 2016). Such problems, however, cannot be exclusively attributed to the scenery of food and spirituality as there are an overwhelming amount of cases of anxiety, depression and meaningless existence in the modern society with their own individual causes and personal reasons. Interestingly, some people previously diagnosed with eating disorders have experienced cessation of symptoms and mental health problems after participating in the spiritual ritual of Ayahuasca drinking (Lafrance *et al.*, 2017). This is important to note since Ayahuasca consumption has been linked with better emotion control (Domínguez-Clavé *et al.*, 2019), long-time reduction of depression and stress (Uthaug *et al.*, 2018) and potential to cure drug addiction (Ru *et al.*, 2016). A case could be postulated, therefore, that in the instance of food disorders caused by an excess of negative emotion and other psychological problems, spirituality can seemingly recalibrate the brain in a way to alleviate these afflictions.

Body image and obesity are other areas of interest that are often affiliated with not only consumption of food but also to one's own spirituality regarding food. There has been a case in New Zealand that studied the Body Mass Index (BMI) of adolescents who attend church versus the ones who do not, and found that the former have higher BMI's than the latter (Dewes *et al.*, 2013). The possible reasons for the outcome are cited by authors as unclear and another study also showed no association between obesity and religiosity/spirituality (Reeves *et al.*, 2012). However, when undertaking a religious programme with a spiritual component, people with weight issues showed improvements in uncontrolled eating, emotional eating, intuitive eating, mental and spiritual wellbeing (Patel *et al.*, 2017). A follow-up study after six months showed that the improvements remained (Patel

*et al.*, 2017). Hawks *et al.* (2003) have further reported a significant link between BMI, emotional eating and spiritual well-being. This suggests that religiosity is not necessarily correlated with a healthier lifestyle and that there has to be an element of feelings and subjective participation. There are cases where religious neighbourhoods and communities indeed influence food choices and practices (Tan *et al.*, 2014) but simply attending church is not automatically an indicator of positive health (Tan *et al.*, 2016). The particular case could also be explored through a different lens as women practicing yoga have reported better body-spirit connection which naturally transfers to better intuitive eating and self-perceived body image (Dittman and Freedman, 2009). This clearly portrays a division between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations when it comes to spirituality in regards to food. From a different angle, anorexia as an eating disorder was linked with a spiritual sense of 'purity' and saintliness (Lelwica, 2011; Bynum, 1985). In terms of body image from the aforementioned cases a pattern can be distinguished as obesity and anorexia are like opposite extremes, seemingly representing arbitrariness in one case and a yearning for purity in another. The yoga study suggests that creating a body-spirit connection provides a sense of balance, which is then established as a healthier perception of oneself.

This idea is often referred to as mindfulness and has been recently recognised as a potential positive solution for people struggling with food consumption. Mindfulness is usually practiced in a form of meditation and when employed both during and outside of eating was shown to help people significantly improve conditions of their eating disorders (Kristeller and Jordan, 2018). It is argued that mindfulness proves useful in such cases because it connects an individual to the higher self which is in essence a very similar motif explored in the yoga study (Dittman and Freedman, 2009). Likewise, it appears that mindful eating helps one to look at a situation from outside of themselves (Brummans *et al.*, 2016), which provides a different perspective on consuming food as a problem (Burser *et al.*, 2014). A case could be made from an objective scientifically sceptical perspective that this is either a placebo effect or from a cynical viewpoint that meditation is just another way to deceive oneself about existence of spirituality. However, a study was conducted where Buddhist monks ate 15-19g of protein and meditated 3-4 times a day and were compared to regular people who consumed 30g of protein a day (Stiprija and Suvanpha, 1983). It was followed by a three-year observation period and the group of monks remained in stable health condition while the control group of participants experienced a consistent progression towards terminal renal failure. When it comes to food practices or issues with consumption, mindfulness and spirituality seems to have a very high potential as a research area.

### **3.4. Food as a Way of Life**

#### **3.4.1. Food, Spirituality and Economy**

Due to the inherent integrity and necessity of nourishment in human life and its role in society, food quite naturally falls under the category of economic resources. Although much of this subject area is outside the scope of this paper, the spiritual aspects of food and economy are occasionally discussed in literature, and therefore deserve a section of their own. The economic value of food is determined in some calculations by how good it is (Thompson and McDonald, 2013), and how good anything is relative to the situation subject to particular time and place. Hence, such activities like food rituals to appease the Gods in Mayan times have been known to be an integral part of society, politics and economy, increasing the relative value of food not only from a nourishment but also a spiritual perspective (Morehart and Butler, 2010). Spirituality in this sense can have a great deal of impact on resources by diverting or creating demand for certain foods or food products and can often follow the development towards different forms of extremes. A particular case was recorded in Russia where bottled water was marketed and sold as blessed by the Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (Caldwell, 2007). This, of course, is a bad case of exploitative commercialism but tourism, for example, has been shown to be very promising in conveying spirituality through food. As Ron and Timothy (2013) point out, there are a lot of references to food in the bible which in Israel are used as attributes to improve and expand tourist experiences using re-enactments of the Last Supper and other iconic elements. Aside from food products and experiences, it also seems like spirituality can positively influence food preparation. Spiritual intelligence has been shown to directly impact food handler's hygiene and performance practices quite substantially in a positive way (Saad *et al.*, 2019). There seems to be a link between a sense of meaning and quality of food produced by the food handlers and their overall satisfaction, which increases work output and economic efficiency. Spirituality is subject to exploitation but at the same time also holds a myriad of potential benefits and solutions when it comes to food practices. However, food is not just consumed or prepared but is also acquired, and current industrial animal farming methods pose a lot of questions about the current spiritual state of our relationship to nature. Massaro (2017) claims that animals in contemporary farming tend to be objectified and points out that it shows general arbitrariness and derailment of the public from the western Christian values. The author invites science, society and economy to be guided by attention to wholeness of creation, to aid us in our process of development. When it comes to food and economy it seems that spirituality has the potential to play a holistic role.

### 3.4.2. Spirituality, customs and cultural food practices

Food practices are extremely profound and fundamental due to their regularity, and have been linked with different religions and theology in general through all recorded history (Salonen, 2018). Most of these food practices are speculated to be adopted by folk in order to avoid diseases relative to their time and place (Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Ghaffari, 2014). However, it seems evident that spirituality, religion and belief shape our understanding of nourishment and the way we conduct ourselves around it (Thompson and McDonald, 2013). There particularly seems to be an almost universal controversy when it comes to meat consumption. The Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) share commonalities when it comes to the role of meat in diet reflecting special relationship that God bestowed between humans and animals (Farouk *et al.*, 2015; Suzworsky, 2001). However, Jews and Muslims usually restrict pork and some other animal products while Christians have no limitations when it comes to animal foods in their diets (Farouk *et al.*, 2015). Some claim that Judaism and Christianity share many common food practices that can help in sharing cultural introspection between religions (Hess, 2012). Different slaughtering methods developed as spiritual practices in Abrahamic faiths such as Kosher and Halal to this day appear to be quite popular (Mostafa, 2018) but tend to raise food security concerns when compared to contemporary practices (Farouk *et al.*, 2014; Farouk *et al.*, 2015). Some religious denominations, like Adventists, were found to be significantly related to fruit, vegetable and fat intake (Tan *et al.*, 2013). Buddhists are also widely known to practice vegetarianism as they perceive eating flesh, or killing of life in any form, as a sin against their teachings and traditions (Hopkins, 1906; Sarao, 2008; Nath, 2010). Research suggests, however, that followers of Krishna were found the most explicit in their vegetarianism when compared to Buddhists and Adventists (Nath, 2010). Some Buddhists indulge in animal consumption and their food practices, just like beliefs, vary from place to place alongside local customs and traditions of the particular regions, which suggests that spiritual practices are as much influenced by culture and vice versa (Hopkins, 1906).

Culture is the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought. If so, then it can be safely assumed that food culture is a collective of food customs, traditions and practices. Hence, it becomes quite evident why these building blocks tend to hold so much subjective value. Food customs contain intrinsic worth for individuals (Chen and Shao, 2012; Pufall *et al.*, 2011) and help to establish common rituals to build in-group identity, social structure and cohesion (Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Thompson and McDonald, 2013). It is also a symbol for cultural solidarity (Thompson and McDonald, 2013) and has shown to be a great facilitator in

conveying and exchanging experiences subject to both spiritual and religious understanding (Ron and Timothy, 2013; Hess, 2012). In fact, culture, food and spirituality seem so interconnected that it is quite difficult to pinpoint the *prima materia* of the subject at hand. However, records suggest that if food practices shift, with it follows ideals and lifestyle devotedness (Owens, 2011). A case in Papua New Guinea shows how their food customs, traditions and mythological symbolism drastically changed with the coming of Christian missionaries and adoption of the new faith (Dundon, 2004). In as much so, spirituality shapes and influences the food customs, which in turns builds and defines a particular culture as this culture truly embodies its innate, lived and practiced spirituality. Which one came first can only be speculated, but each element of the cycle is dependent on each other seemingly forming a trinity.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper contributes to our understanding of food spirituality first by acknowledging the multiple lenses the topic can be examined under (including physical and social sciences, humanities, and interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies). By analysing selected literature to find similarities and themes in dimensions covering the topics of food and spirituality, it provides some clarity and on our conceptualisation on what food spirituality currently means. The analysis of the literature suggests that there are four broad categories that food spirituality can be understood by: Food and Identity; Food and Outlook; Food Consumption, Wellness and Spirituality; and Food as A Way of Life.

The topic as a whole was analysed chronologically to distinguish any particular emerging elements or reoccurring patterns. Certain topics regarding foundational values, identity and culture were found to be stable not only historically but also in both past and contemporary research. This suggests that these particular issues are fundamental to food and spirituality, and therefore could be studied to understand the central aspects of humanity. On the other hand, certain subjects have been relative to change recently. For instance, wellness and food spirituality have seen a steady increase in popularity since the start of the millennium, becoming its own research niche. Industrial animal farming and environmental problems have further evolved with awareness as global problems.

As with every study, this one also has some inherent limitations. Firstly, findings of the study are subject to one university's access rights and based on analysis of journals only. Future research should include different types of publishing outlets including books and conference proceedings. Secondly, when writing about a highly personal topic such as

spirituality and food it is very difficult to do so objectively and without any personal bias. Therefore, what is presented here is a summary of what is mostly individual subjective experiences and beliefs by someone with a self of their own. However, in order to reduce bias as much as possible, every single religious denomination, spiritual idea and food tradition was treated with the same level of respect and integrity. This holistic approach was employed in attempts to allow every paper to stand witness for itself, letting the subjects unfold naturally. Lastly, future studies could include additional keywords (perhaps relevant to themes identified in this paper) to widen the search parameters and better understand food spirituality.

After all, the subject of food and spirituality is so broad that it is near impossible to properly narrow it down. Food is one of the central aspects of the experience of human existence that we form a spiritual connection to. However, there does seem to be an underlying principle uniting the topics discussed in this paper, and it can be identified as connectivity. As a result of this literature review we would, therefore, propose a definition for “Food spirituality” as:

*“An innate sense of connection that a subject can experience to and through food in regard to personal and social identity, culture and ritual, nature and the environment, body and soul, the mundane and the universal.”*

Historically and presently, the fundamental question is how much we do not understand about this subject as every aspect of the food cycle contains remarkably deep spiritual and psychological implications. However, if there is anything certain it would be that we are not going to stop eating any time soon, and food spirituality could prove invaluable in understanding our human nature on a profoundly holistic level.

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