

# ‘God is a vegetarian’: The food, health and bio-spirituality of Hare Krishna, Buddhist and Seventh-Day Adventist devotees

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Food is a significant part of the daily worship, health and social life of individuals across cultures and religions. This is especially the case for vegetarian religious minorities such as the Indian sub-continental borne Hare Krishna movement, the Christian Seventh-Day Adventist Church and various Buddhist groups. These devotees define spirituality as more than simply the state or quality of being committed to ‘God’, religion and immaterial spiritual concerns. This paper argues that there are visible, tangible and even biological frames of reference from which spirituality within the aforementioned religious groups should be considered. The concept of bio-spirituality introduced here, embodies and grounds matters pertinent to faith, health and worship in the everyday social actions and interactions of devotees both inside and outside the sphere of the temple or church. Bio-spirituality is a conceptual tool that accounts for the relationship between supernatural belief, and the natural physical environment. It was formulated to encapsulate the social, nutritional and spiritual dimensions of 18 self-identified religious vegetarians who were interviewed as part of larger qualitative study of alternative food habits and practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** sociology; food; bio-spirituality; health; vegetarianism; religion

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sociological investigations of religion have rarely included exploration of the health logic and food practices of religious groups, especially the minority groups that recommend a vegetarian nutritional career. The dominant themes of the contemporary sociology of religion are resacralisation, fundamentalism and revivalism within mainstream religions, and the research emanating from these areas supports established theoretical ideas about the nature of religiosity and spirituality in modernity (Eisenstadt 2000; Taylor 2007; Volpi and Turner 2007). The current popular emphasis on ‘de-institutionalised’

or ‘post-institutional’ movements in the West are defined as increasingly privatised and associated with themes of therapy, peace, wealth and self-help (Turner 2009:196). With the exception of recent explanations of the growth in complementary and alternative medicine (Coulter and Willis 2007) the role of food and health logic within these themes is often obscure, if mentioned at all, as are any references to more alternative and marginal approaches to food, health and spirituality. The three largest Australian religious organisations or groups that have historical ties to vegetarianism are the Hindu-based Hare Krishna, the Christian Seventh-Day Adventist Church

and various Buddhist denominations. Whilst secularism continues to grow in Australia and mainstream Christianity declines, some minority groups have increased their membership. The fastest growing religions during the Australian Bureau of Statistics intercensal period (2001–2006) were: Hinduism by 55.1%, non-religion by 27.5%, Islam by 20.9%, Buddhist affiliation by 17% and Judaism by 6%. Christianity was the only religion to show negative growth, with the number of followers falling by 0.6% (ABS 2006).

Bio-spirituality is any form of worship or system of belief involving the veneration of a person, or object considered to be divine or sacred, through rites, prayers, meditation or benevolent acts, that is *contingent* on the consumption of foods which are classified according to values concerning life and living organisms. These values are underpinned by philosophical, religious or even scientifically derived ideas about both plant and animal-based food sources. This means that any doctrines or practices representative of human attachment to a higher level of existence are grounded through the physical act of eating certain foods and abstaining from others. The nutritional choices of devotees thus become a literal manifestation of faith. The concept of bio-spirituality will be used throughout this paper to interpret and clarify the relationship between the food, health and worship of vegetarian religious minorities, but it may also be applicable across other cultures where food and faith are highly interdependent.

There are two defining and shared elements of bio-spirituality within Krishna, Buddhist and Adventist faiths that makes them distinct and worthy of sociological exploration. Firstly, both the theoretical and applied philosophical foundations of these groups represent a break with the conventional Cartesian mind/body/spirit disjunction. The Hare Krishna, and Buddhists, in particular, do not adhere to orthodox religious ideas about ‘man’ and his alleged dominion over ‘nature’. Neither do they adhere to the

mainstream Cartesian view which, as it assumed the status of God in modern societies, gave an increasingly popular scientific legitimacy to existing Christian discourses on the superiority of ‘man’ and the subordinate status of animals (Newman 2001; Thomas 1983).

Secondly, and most importantly in the context of health sociology, the kind of spirituality practised by these groups is critically shaped by *food*. The ritual significance and symbolic history of food in mainstream religions is well established (Comstock 1992:126; Gendin 1989:25; Schwartz 1999:50–51; Tardiff 1998; Veenker 1999:14). However, new knowledge about the biological character and content of certain foods, and the complex attempts to use it to control human behaviour, optimise health and facilitate worship are new territory for social science. Among the Hare Krishna, and many Buddhists and Adventists, food, health and worship are unified on a daily basis, at every meal. The manifestation of this unification is of course nuanced across groups, but collectively, it is clear that earthly, pragmatic and biologically determined frameworks constitute a *bio-spirituality* that represents a fundamental shift from conventional expressions of faith.

This article will focus firstly on the lesser known Hindu-based Hare Krishna, also referred to as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). The second and third sections will examine the spirituality and food relationship of Buddhists and Seventh-Day Adventists, and data permitting, some comparisons will be made with the Krishna devotees. The significance of the biologically informed spirituality across these groups will then be discussed within contemporary contexts of nutrition and healthcare.

## ORIGINS AND PRACTICES OF HARE KRISHNA, BUDDHIST AND ADVENTIST FAITHS

The Hare Krishna vegetarian religious movement was developed in the mid-twentieth century by

A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Brooks 1989, 1992:160; Prabhupāda 1980, 1987). It has its origins in the monotheistic tradition of Vaishnavism in ancient India. The Hare Krishna form of Vaishnavism emphasises the cultivation of a personal relationship with God, in the form of Krishna, Rama, Vishnu or any of the divine incarnations (Rosen 1992:i). Upon accepting a spiritual leader and Krishna consciousness, a devotee vows to abstain from the eating of meat, alcohol, gambling and sex outside of marriage and for purposes other than procreation (Burke Rochford 1995:157; Judah 1974). The most distinctive aspect of Krishna faith relates to the significance of food rules and classifications, and the central role these have in the maintenance of good health and effective worship.

In most Buddhist diasporas, there are no mandatory food-related edicts from their leaders such as the Dalai Lama or any other Buddhist priests or monks of Chinese Zhu Lin, Tibetan or Indian denomination that might oblige devotees to be vegetarian. Buddhists are more interested in the development of personal philosophy and processes of internal reflection that achieve a blissful yet gracious disposition and harmony with the devotees' immediate surroundings. Vegetarianism is chosen only if a devotee considers it to be a valuable tool for reaching a particular level of consciousness. However, for all of the Buddhist informants in this study, the preference for plant-based foods, however rigidly followed, is spiritually connected to a utilitarian logic that strives to achieve a balance both within the body and in the physical environment through non-interference with animals, as the latter are considered to have their own interests and a unique place in the world. It is a logic that is born out of the ancient Buddhist adherence to the principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence (Chapple 1993:10; Kaza 2005:392).

Vegetarianism is not the dominant practice for followers of mainstream Christianity. However, one established Christian group believes that their spiritual health operates in concert with

their physical health, and that both are enhanced by adherence to a vegetarian diet. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has historic links to the health Sanatoriums of the 'Christian Physiology' movement in the United States. This nineteenth-century health reform movement was underscored by beliefs that diet was not only essential in maintaining health, but also was pivotal in shaping morality (Le Blanc 1997:94; Levenstein 1988:93). Despite its significant role in shaping the mass-produced breakfast cereal industry, the frugal, morally earnest vegetarian health regimes typical of this movement proved to be unpopular with the meat-eating masses.

Food practices have been considerably important for emerging alternative religious and philosophical currents such as Buddhism and the Hare Krishna. Studies of food, ethics and identity have yet to fully account for the spread of these distinctly Eastern style religions/movements. Tester (1999) argues that the adoption of Eastern traditions in the West represents a growth in 'New Age' sensibilities (1999:221). However, it is important to make a distinction between the growth of spirituality in secular societies and public interest in a 'New Age' sensibility. Tacey (2003) argues that spirituality has come to the attention of the fields of public health, social work and psychology because it is larger and more encompassing than the New Age, which is a commercialised 'wing' of new spiritual movements. New Age often relates to the 'exploitation' of public interest, whereas spirituality is a response to, and engagement with, the social environment. It might also be a consequence of secular societies searching for answers to burgeoning social problems (2003:3). King (2008) suggests that a significant part of the appeal of spiritual movements in modernity is that they have come to be seen as more inclusive and accessible than orthodox mainstream religions, though the latter groups do maintain their own unique and adaptive expressions of spirituality (2008:121). The connection between food, faith and modernity is harder to discern, especially outside the sphere

of established mainstream Western and Eastern faiths such as Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christianity, and Islam. Hare Krishna, Seventh-Day Adventists and various Buddhist diasporas are among the known religious groups that practise meat abstention in Australia and are thus part of the Western vegetarian phenomenon. Their food habits and health beliefs offer fresh terrain for socially directed inquiries of nutritional practices.

### THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

The data excerpts for this paper were collected as part of a larger study of the social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of vegetarian nutritional careers. The term, 'nutritional career' was originally devised and deployed by the British sociologists Beardsworth and Keil (1991, 1997) to illuminate the health-related beliefs and dietary practices of vegetarians and vegans. In the context of this Australian study, the concept refers to both past and present food habits, practices and dietary paths followed by the informants. The term 'nutritional' implies that beliefs about health are significant, and are thus *not* mutually exclusive facets of the social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of Australian vegetarianism.

Following University ethics committee approval, the data was collected between October 2003 and January 2005. A sample of self-identified secular and religious vegetarians was recruited by sending flyers and information letters about the study to vegetarian restaurants, vegetarian societies, environmental groups, a Hare Krishna temple, Buddhist temples and two Seventh-Day Adventist Churches in both the Adelaide Eastern and Southern metropolitan area, inviting participation. A substantial snowball sample thus evolved, and a total of 44 people responded and consented to an interview. Eighteen research subjects expressed religious dimensions to their nutritional career and complex spiritual connections between their diet and their social life course. Of this self-identified group of 18, six informants identified as Hare

Krishna devotees, five were Buddhist and seven persons were Adventists who regularly worshipped at a Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

Drawing from the central tenets of a constructivist incarnation of the grounded theory process meant that as the data collection advanced, unexpected issues raised by informants could be taken up with the next informant. The interview guideline was thus originally shaped by a review of pertinent clinical and social science literature, and an historical analysis of the politics of food choice, but then expanded throughout the data collection period, resulting in a variety of issues being canvassed. This provided informants with greater scope to emphasise the dimensions of their vegetarianism beyond what the initial interview guideline sought (Charmaz 2006:133). The in-depth interviews ranged in length from one hour to two and a half hours, with most averaging two hours. To maximise the reliability of findings, all interviews were transcribed and thematic categories were produced based on an initial reading of transcripts. In keeping with established conventions for interpretive research, the resulting inferences and written analyses were thus supported and grounded in verbatim extracts from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Ryan and Russell Bernard 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1990). All of the informants chose their own pseudonyms, and these will be used in the following presentation of results.

### FINDINGS

The data across all three groups shows that bio-spirituality is most explicit in the vegetarianism of Hare Krishna devotees. Their nutritional practices represent a significant departure from mainstream Judaeo-Christian thinking about the kinds of food that their Deity or Supreme Being is believed to desire, and thus what foods should be an integral part of faith, health and identity. There are three key themes from the data that constitute bio-spirituality in Hare Krishna social life. The first theme relates to how 'God' or Krishna is perceived. In this study, all

six Hare Krishna devotees stated, some quite vehemently, that, ‘God is a vegetarian’. As this belief is unequivocal, a vegetarian nutritional career is requisite for devotees upon acceptance of the Hare Krishna doctrine. The second theme is characterised by a belief that the consumption of particular foods from both animal and vegetable origin can have varying degrees of influence on human health and devotional service. The third theme relates to the importance of distributing food to non-devotees and non-vegetarians throughout the wider public.

### ‘God is a vegetarian’

As noted, there are principles of non-violence and allusions to meat abstention throughout the many and varied interpretations of Christian scripture, and there are arguably threads of utilitarian consideration for animals in all religious doctrines, but few are as pronounced or as obligatory as the Hare Krishna interpretation of Vedic scriptures in the Bhagavad-gītā. Eating what is acceptable and pleasing to God, or Krishna, is the first and foremost way in which Hare Krishna devotees express their faith. All of the ingredients involved in the preparation of a meal are considered to be the earthly bounty of Krishna. To demonstrate affection and appreciation of food, the devotee offers the food back to Krishna. This gesture must be a loving exchange that establishes the critical reciprocity between devotee and deity. Once the prepared foods have been offered to God they are sanctified and thus ready to be consumed and enjoyed by the devotee. The equally essential task of distributing sanctified food or ‘prasadam’ to non-devotees will be examined shortly. What is of importance in the first instance is that reciprocity cannot commence unless the foods prepared are of a character and content that is agreeable to Krishna. Meat or flesh foods are not acceptable. As one senior and longstanding devotee, Rama Dasa, emphasised, the vegetarian nutritional career of Krishna sets the example and establishes the dietary norm for all devotees:

... as much as God is a person, well you could say in a nutshell that God is a vegetarian, and we only eat food that is first offered to God. Now God is a vegetarian, Krishna is a vegetarian, so therefore we only eat food that we can offer to him, in the Bhagavad-gītā he says offer me fruit and vegetables and things like that. He doesn’t say offer me slaughtered animals! So we only eat of the food that he eats because he is a vegetarian and we are just subservient (Male, aged 51–58).

Krishna Das is a Hare Krishna priest and teacher who has also been formally involved with his temple for over 10 years. He talked at length about his relationship with God and the importance of knowing what foods are healthy and thus acceptable:

... as a devotee of Krishna my life revolves around that relationship, Krishna says in his Bhagavad-gītā that he will accept foods that are offered to him with love and he mentions leaf, fruit, flower and water. So the reason I am a vegetarian primarily is because those are the foods I can offer Krishna. He will not accept meat, fish, eggs, onion and garlic and mushrooms. He won’t take them (Male, aged 26–34).

It is also important to note that because the foods that Hare Krishna devotees eat are always offered to Krishna first, the quality of the produce and overall cuisine must be consummate and indefectible. Hare Krishna devotees desire minimal processing of the fruit, vegetables and dairy-based meals that are prepared for Krishna. Consequently, as another devotee, Mahesh, explained, there are foods that are fervidly prohibited. This means no junk food or ‘fast food’, even if it were vegetarian, and no other processed foods:

... our food is normally made from scratch, because as I was saying before, it’s more of a sacred offering. The food is actually prepared from scratch with raw vegetables and things like that, a lot of cooking and preparation, a lot

of fresh foods. So we go shopping every other day. Nothing out of a tin and those things (Male, aged 35–42).

The belief that ‘God is a vegetarian’ is one of three major themes to emerge in the data. It points to a form of spirituality defined by the direct social actions of devotees, and expressed through food-related contexts of cooking and eating. The biological urge to satisfy hunger is tempered by the practice of preparing food for Krishna first, following time-honoured codes that inform the devotee what foods Krishna will and will not eat. Knowing what foods God will accept is only part of an essential process of acquiring food knowledge for devotees. They must also discover the innate qualities of foods, and learn about their impact on human health and wellbeing. Informant comprehension and articulation of this knowledge forms the second theme in the data that exemplifies Hare Krishna bio-spirituality.

**Goodness, Passion and Ignorance: The ternary system of food, health and behaviour in Hare Krishna Life**

The aforementioned informant comments make it clear that a vegetarian nutritional career is

obligatory for Hare Krishna devotees. However, in addition to meat, there are also some plant-based foods that are taboo. It is also evident that there are inextricable links between biological properties of certain foods and their perceived impact on human health and religiosity. The bio-spirituality of Hare Krishna devotees is strongly predicated on their subscription to a ternary system of human behaviour. Nutrition and emotional state are not considered disparate phenomena in Krishna faith and worship. Rather, they attribute three behavioural dispositions or emotional states: ignorance, passion and goodness, directly to the consumption of certain foods (see Table 1). Food, health, behavioural dispositions and faith are thus categorised and perceived as interrelated, through the three modes.

Foods in the mode of ignorance are unacceptable to devotees as they are said to lead to ill health and a dulling of consciousness. Meat and plant foods such as fungi fall into this category. In addition, the consumption of plants from the Allium family are believed to lead to a passionate demeanour, which is likewise unacceptable. Hare Krishna devotees embrace a diet that is constituted by foods in the mode of ‘goodness’, which, as listed in Table 1, are described as fresh

TABLE 1: THE HARE KRISHNA TERNARY SYSTEM OF FOOD, HEALTH AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

Behavioural mode	Food types/classifications	Bio-spiritual impact/effect
Goodness (Higher mode)	<i>Dairy products:</i> Including butter, cheese and yoghurt*. Also, sugar, honey, herbs, spices, fruits, nuts, grains, pulses, beans and most vegetables.	<i>Advances spirituality:</i> Foods may be offered to Krishna and then consumed.
Passion (Lower mode)	<i>Genus Allium:</i> Onions, garlic, leeks, chives and shallots. <i>Liquids:</i> Caffeinated beverages such as coffees and teas (decaffeinated versions are acceptable).	<i>Negates spirituality:</i> Foods must not be offered to Krishna and should not be consumed.
Ignorance (Lowest mode)	<i>Genus Fungi:</i> All varieties of edible mushroom. Also, meat and eggs from all mammal, bird, reptile, insect and aquatic species.	<i>Negates spirituality:</i> Foods must not be offered to Krishna and should not be consumed. Foods are considered unclean and cause distress and disease.

\*If Hare Krishna devotees choose to eat cheese, it must be rennet-free, and if yoghurt is consumed it must be free of gelatine.

fruit and vegetables, nuts, grains and seeds, beans and pulses, sugar, honey, herbs and most spices, and some dairy products. Foods in the mode of goodness exclude all other plant species in the aforementioned two negative modes and always exclude meat or flesh foods, and eggs from all mammals, birds, reptiles and aquatic species.

Adherence to the ternary system of food, health and human behaviour is a defining aspect of Hare Krishna bio-spirituality that shapes and drives the social actions and interactions of devotees both inside and outside of the temple. Krishna devotees believe that if they choose to eat these meat and flesh foods and plant foods from the Allium and Fungi family, then they are choosing a life of ignorance, disease and indulgence which has the potential to lead to violence, lustfulness and spiritual impoverishment. However, there are some animal products such as milk and butter, which are not only acceptable; they are considered to be an essential ingredient for maintaining sound physical and spiritual health. Rama Dasa teaches vegetarian Krishna style cooking all over Australia, and like other devotees, he is well versed on the religious reasoning that justifies the exclusion of certain foods from his diet:

The reason why I don't eat members of the Allium family is because they have an adverse effect on the central nervous system. They disturb meditation and hence undermine one's devotions, disturb the mind. You will find that members of, ahh, strict Buddhists adhere to a similar diet in regards to the Allium family for the very same reason. Buddhist texts recommend avoiding those foods because they lead to lewd behaviour, and a bad state of mind, so I also subscribe to that view. Members of the Vaishnava school also don't eat mushrooms because they're considered to be in a fungus department, considered to be unacceptable (Male, aged 51–58).

As this demonstrates, the behavioural modes of ignorance, passion and goodness are all of

paramount importance in the nutritional career of Hare Krishna devotees. All of the informants strongly emphasised their understanding of how their health and their devotional service is sustained by choosing foods in the mode of 'goodness'. The consequences of not consuming or choosing foods in this mode are severe. Krishna devotees draw biological and chemical links between the kinds of foods consumed and the spiritual impact on the human mind and body. Krishna Das is adamant that there are serious social and psychological consequences of eating meat. He teaches the newcomers to the Krishna movement that a person who eats flesh will adopt an ignorant and passionate demeanour that can manifest through violent and uncontrollable outbursts:

... I choose foods in the mode of goodness which are health giving. You know the maxim you are what you eat. My understanding is that by eating non-vegetarian food then we accept the consciousness of the animal at the time of death. It is manifest in terms of certain chemicals secreted by the animal. I'll give you an example: when an animal is killed, this leads to a secretion of adrenalin in the blood, that is stored in the tissues and you end up eating that, and that has an effect on your state of mind and your biochemistry. It affects you adversely, and I can say definitely that anger and lust, all these agitating emotions are caused by eating meat. Vegetarians are generally more peaceful than meat-eaters (Male, aged 26–34).

The Krishna informants claimed that eating meat perpetuates a dangerous cycle of violence between humans and animals. In their view, non-vegetarians participate in animal slaughter, and are culpable in a literal sense, if they work in an abattoir, on a farm, or even participate in recreational angling. Moreover, they consider non-vegetarians to be accessories to the butchering of animals by virtue of their demand for, and consumption of, flesh foods. Devotional service to Krishna also requires a commitment to

supplanting perceived violence with harmony, and this commitment drives devotees into their respective secular communities in an effort to cultivate and share their highly prized mode of goodness with as many non-devotees as possible. It is this food-based social context of Hare Krishna bio-spirituality that represents the third major theme that emerged from the data.

**Devotional service: The distribution of food and the improvement of public health and spirituality**

Krishna devotees believe that their spiritually imbued cuisine has the appropriate biological properties to purify and elevate the spiritual awareness of the wider public. It is this perceived cultivation of the mode of goodness through eating, offering and sharing the right foods that underscores the Hare Krishna devotees’ dedication to encouraging non-devotees to eat foods that are physically and spiritually nourishing. At Hare Krishna restaurants around Australia and at many other public venues, the devotees’ commitment to sharing their food and nutrition profoundly shapes and drives their social actions and interactions throughout their respective communities.

Rama Dasa has further extended his Krishna devotional service into public spheres by conducting vegetarian cooking classes. An interest in public health is an essential component of Hare Krishna spirituality. The sharing of vegetarian food and enjoyment of food with non-devotees is credited as a valuable means of enhancing both the devotee’s relationship with Krishna, and also the non-devotees’ spirituality and nutritional career:

... devotees appreciate that foods that are being prepared in a loving environment are not only materially but spiritually nutritious. So we like to share vegetarian food with everyone and anyone who tastes this style of cooking, appreciates it, and so we share our food with anyone who is happy to eat it. But I have

noticed, and I have found from my experiences in the past that people who are addicted to eating meat, when they actually eat foods that have been prepared in a spiritual environment, they become less carnivorously inclined, gradually, and the taste for flesh dissipates. It is just one of the side-effects of eating the right foods or prasadam as it is called, and they naturally find themselves wanting to eat less meat and eat more of other things and so it is a positive contribution (Male, aged 51–58).

‘Prasadam’ is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘the mercy of the Lord’. Devotees are taught that by consuming prasadam or ‘sanctified’ food, they are protected from karmic reactions and can therefore advance spiritually (Prabhupāda 1980:189, 1987:51). Krishna Das also described how his devotional service and nutritional career has shaped his social actions both inside and outside of the temple. Like other Krishna informants he placed great emphasis on the importance of sharing vegetarian food with the public through Hare Krishna social programs:

I am mainly a priest and a teacher. We encourage people to become vegetarians and offer their food to God. That is the main thing we do. We have lots of free feasts; we like to give away our food because we understand it has a spiritual benefit. Every day, anyone is welcome to come around and have a free meal. There is our food for life program, every Monday and Wednesday evening we cook up nice simple vegetarian food and we take it down to the centre of the city and give it out free for hungry people (Male, aged 26–34).

Vegetarianism is much more than a dietary change for Hare Krishna devotees. Their bio-spirituality compels them to define animal and vegetable organisms as something other than simply an energy source. This belief is not, of course, exclusive to religious vegetarians. However, what is unique about Hare Krishna devotional service is that it is governed by the



primary belief that God is a vegetarian, and subsequently by the adherence to the ternary system of food and behaviour. These defining aspects of Krishna worship explain their food habits and practices in various social contexts outside the temple. According to this system, particular foods of both animal and vegetable origin are perceived to have the ability to maintain optimal health, influence the way a person behaves towards others, and most importantly, determine the nature of that person's relationship with Krishna, or God.

### **Food, health and faith in Seventh-Day Adventist spirituality**

Having established the bio-spiritual dimensions of Hare Krishna vegetarianism, this section draws attention to perspectives on food, faith and worship from another Australian religious community with an established history of vegetarianism. Although the nature of their bio-spirituality is more subdued, and meat-eating is not directly attributed to any negative behavioural disposition, Seventh-Day Adventists do consider a 'healthy mind' and a 'healthy body' to be an essential daily aspect of faith and worship. The selection of vegetarian foods is a principal means by which Adventists maintain good health. All seven informants who identified as being Seventh-Day Adventists placed considerable importance on their vegetarian nutritional career as part of their faith. Yet, in contrast to Hare Krishna devotees, not one Adventist informant discussed or described God as a vegetarian that required all devotees to follow suit. There is most certainly a spiritually significant health logic that underscores why it is preferable to abstain from the consumption of meat, but overall, informants described vegetarianism as less of an obligation and more of a *tradition* in Adventist life that is adhered to somewhat less rigidly now than it was in the past. Interestingly, Adventist informants also suggested that as the church has become more 'mainstream', meat-eating has become more tolerated. Popular

influences notwithstanding, abstention from drinking and smoking, and adopting a vegetarian nutritional career are still the ideal for those Adventists who want to enhance their spiritual life and relationship with God. Adventist informants talked specifically about a 'health message', which underscores why maintaining a vegetarian nutritional career in Adventist worship is preferable. Michelle, a parent and school teacher, mentioned the term 'health message' numerous times throughout her interview, as did all of the Adventist informants. Michelle was raised on a health-related message that instructs her to keep her body drug-free and meat-free in an effort to please God. Interestingly, she also suggested that meat-eating is now no longer considered as unhealthy as smoking and drinking:

Healthy living is what they advocate which is true and correct, and that is because we are God's people. Somewhere in Timothy, it says something like that, and we need to look after our bodies because that is what God wants us to do, and the best way to do that is to make sure we don't consume things that are unacceptable to our bodies, e.g. smoking and drinking, and meat-eating. They don't advocate that as a church so much any more but they used to. No that's not true they still do, they still do vegetarian cooking things and all of that but it's not something that you have to do to be Adventist. So it's a preferred kind of thing, but smoking and drinking are looked upon as more negative than eating meat within the Adventist Church (Female, aged 35–42).

Growing up in Adventist culture may not obligate congregations to maintain a vegetarian nutritional career, but it clearly stands out as a social environment that is conducive to, and tolerant of, meat abstention. Carol, an aged carer, has been an Adventist for all of her life and a vegetarian for over 40 years. In similarity with Michelle and other Adventist informants, she spoke about her vegetarian family upbringing, the importance of being healthy for God, and

her desire to become totally vegetarian after she had her children:

I was brought up as a Seventh-Day Adventist so vegetarian eating was familiar to me all my life. My parents at various stages did eat some meat but never a lot of meat, and I don't remember ever having meat on the table as a regular thing, but when I married and had a family, my eldest son was very young at that stage ... at that stage we did eat the odd piece of fish if we were at a restaurant or something, not that we ever went to a restaurant very often, it wasn't as easy to be a vegetarian as it is now, especially to eat out, but then we made a conscious decision, for health and for our religion, that if we were going to be vegetarian we were going to be vegetarian and that was that! And that was forty odd years ago and I've had no reason to change my mind since then (Female, aged 59–66).

Maintaining good health and religious commitment are not mutually exclusive aspects of the social life course of Hare Krishna devotees and Seventh-Day Adventists. Their respective God is perceived to look benevolently upon persons who carefully consider what they eat and how they live. Vegetarian food and nutrition is thus a fundamental part of devotional service for the Krishna faithful, and continues to be considered the ideal for Adventists.

### **Buddhist food and faith**

There are some important differences in Buddhist bio-spirituality when contrasted with Hare Krishna devotees and Seventh-Day Adventists. The data showed that food is certainly an integral part of the bio-spirituality of Buddhist devotees who maintain a vegetarian nutritional career. Buddhists highlighted the importance of the quality and quantity of foods that assist them in maintaining focus and balance, not only in their spiritual meditations, but also for their social actions and interactions with family, friends and work colleagues. However,

the key difference between Buddhists and other religious devotees cited thus far is the individualistic nature of Buddhist faith and worship, and the primacy of a utilitarian ethic that defines humans and animals as equal biological entities. This form of religion also locates the spiritual within the person themselves, not specifically between the individual and their church or temple. Mohan, a medical practitioner, who is also a Buddhist and lifelong vegetarian, suggested that his knowledge of Western medical science recommendations has been invaluable for maintaining his health and spirituality, in that he knows that there are particular foods that he should try to eat regularly:

I'm not that much of a health freak that I read journals, but I do think whatever vegetables you eat you need to get certain properties, vitamins, protein, fats. So I just make sure I get all of that in, in the quantities that are required, depending on how I feel. I do think that episodes of life that slow people down or make people sick are actually episodes that make you stop and think about life, make you think about what life is all about, because otherwise if life is too comfortable then you probably wouldn't bother about a lot of things (Male, aged 26–34).

Mohan also believes that illness is an opportunity to change: it is the way in which the human body calls attention to an underlying need for meditation and reflection on an individual's state of health and wellbeing. Interestingly, each of the five Buddhist informants mentioned conventional science-derived knowledge about food, and how this kind of information, in varying degrees, helps them to determine which foods could maximise their health and facilitate successful meditation. There is also some common sociological ground occupied by Hare Krishna and Buddhist devotees regarding the distribution of vegetarian food. Buddhist bio-spirituality is underpinned by the principle of non-violence to animals and soul transmigration, two ideas that emphasise the

biological interconnectedness of all species. These beliefs compelled one informant to introduce her philosophical perspectives to a wider audience. Lishi, a Vietnamese born Chinese Australian, has joined with some of her Buddhist family members and close friends to run a totally vegetarian and vegan Chinese influenced Buddhist restaurant. Mock meat styled dishes make up most of the menu in an effort to encourage the meat-eating masses of both Chinese and non-Chinese heritage to try vegetarian food. This has not been an easy task for Lishi and her family. In Australian cultures where meat and animal products are the norm, she and her business colleagues have faced numerous financial and social challenges, and made considerable personal sacrifices in their endeavour to encourage the Australian public to eat more vegetarian food. Despite severe economic hardship, these Buddhists are stoically committed to maintaining their business. Their spiritually driven utilitarian logic is a constant and comforting reminder that every vegetarian meal sold to a transitional eater or outright carnivore, is a meal that has reduced the demand for meat and thus, at a micro-industrial level, has impacted directly on the degree of animal butchering:

... myself and my partners are full on vegetarian and the lady who does the cooking is a full on vegetarian and she has the same vision as I do, and we hope more people we can convince to be vegetarian. But they don't have to be full-time vegetarians like us. But if we can just convince them to come into our restaurant to have one meal, just one meal that means it will lessen the demand for meat for one meal. That means the meat market has lost, will lose out, the demand for meat for one meal, and if we could do that for every single one in Adelaide then we have a lot less demand for meat! Therefore the killings of the animals will happen less. We only make very little difference but we want to make a difference. It has been difficult because we actually, we don't have enough income to cover our expenses.

We managed to cover our bills but we don't have enough to cover wages for my dad and me and my partners. Sometimes they are willing to sacrifice salary and they won't get paid the whole week. We all often miss out on wages (Female, aged 35–42).

Lishi and her family are among many Buddhists in Australia and other countries that draw from arguments about equality in human/non-human-animal relationships to cultivate their unique blend of philosophy and spirituality. The main emphasis of all the Buddhist informants was on the precept of not killing any living being.

## CONCLUSION

This article points to a number of avenues for further research about the relationship between philosophical and spiritual belief systems, food, health, identity and social life. Hare Krishna in particular, but also many Adventist, and Buddhist vegetarians, integrate faith, health and food choice as part of their modern Western existence. The findings indicate that for these vegetarian religious minorities, spiritualism is not perceived as heavenly, discarnate, immaterial or purely metaphysical. Rather, it is grounded in the physical, biological world. Furthermore, all matters pertinent to devotional service are bound up in daily food habits and practices of devotees throughout their social life course. Food, especially in Krishna life, is considered to be an agent for subtle or severe influences on human health and consciousness, and thus, it profoundly shapes the social actions and interactions of the faithful. Hare Krishna vegetarianism is constituted by three interrelated elements of bio-spirituality. The first element is characterised by the recognition that 'God' is a vegetarian, and the second, by an obligation to consume foods that are spiritually imbued. The third feature concerns the duty to share and distribute their sanctified food. Service to Krishna requires a commitment to a variety of social programs that are inextricably food and health-oriented. Devotional service in this

religious group also appears to serve an essential social function, in that bio-spirituality provides a way of entering and engaging the meat-eating world with religiously embedded discursive protection from the difficulties of maintaining an alternative and marginal nutritional career.

The data from Buddhist and Seventh-Day Adventists shows that more research needs to be conducted before commonalities and comparisons can be made with certainty. There are however, a few prime examples of the centrality of vegetarian food for both groups, and the significance of the Buddhist precept of no killing, which governs faith and social life. Whilst the data reported here is not representative in any statistical sense, the experiences of all of the informants indicate that in the course of worship, devotees engage in both social activities and food habits and practices that collectively express their bio-spiritual existence. Future public health-related research could determine the extent to which bio-spirituality improves health outcomes. Clinical studies carried out over two decades ago comparing diet and blood indices of American Seventh-Day Adventists with non-vegetarians across age and gender clearly established cardiovascular benefits of following Adventist diets (Nieman *et al* 1989; Resnicow *et al* 1991). However, the integration between food and faith was not considered. Buddhist, Krishna, and Seventh-Day Adventist devotees certainly do not need convincing, as the consumption of plant-based food continues to be an essential daily ingredient of their health and worship.

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