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Conflicting food advice is leaving shoppers confused. Oscar Wong/Moment via Getty Images

As it gets harder to figure out what to eat, some Americans are turning to religion for answers

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It's getting harder and harder to figure out what to eat. A scroll through social media raises many questions. Why is food so expensive? Am I getting enough protein? What about fiber? Do I need supplements? Should I be making all my bread at home? What foods were recalled this week?

These questions make trips to the grocery store and mealtime decisions more difficult. For centuries, some people have turned to their religious texts and traditions for answers.

In "Born Again Bodies," religious studies scholar R. Marie Griffith traces how Protestant Christian ideas on faith and the body shaped the development of American diet and fitness culture.

Through my decade of ethnographic research on religious food movements, I have found that many Americans are still turning to religion as they decide what to eat. I analyzed four religious alternative food movements in my 2025 book, "Free-Range Religion." I argue there that these movements aren't just changing what they eat; they are working to reshape the American food system from the ground up.

Jewish community farming

Two of the sites I studied were Jewish farms that were providing experiential education opportunities for the local Jewish community. It was part of their larger mission to reconnect Jews to the land and to the agrarian roots of Judaism. They often point out that the ancient Israelites were an agrarian people and that many Jewish laws, values and holidays were shaped by that context.



A compost pile at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. Adrienne Krone

At the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut, I worked alongside young Jewish adults participating in a three-month program, the Adamah Farm Fellowship, as they planted, harvested and prepared produce for their weekly community supported agriculture program. The fellows begin their days with a morning prayer session and take time away from their work on the farm to celebrate Shabbat together. The fellows also attend classes where they learn about the biblical laws and ethical concepts related to agriculture, alongside scientific research on sustainable agriculture.

I conducted my fieldwork during a “shmita” year, a year of rest for the land. Just as the Hebrew Bible instructed Jews to work for six days and rest on Shabbat, the seventh day, they were also instructed to work their land for six years and then let it rest in the seventh year, the shmita year.

Farms took different approaches to the “shmita” year: The Adamah Farm Fellows kept their fields in production and started a community garden to mark their observance of the “shmita” year. At the Pearlstone center in Reisterstown, Maryland, the farmers replaced their usual rows of vegetables with cover crops that would enrich the soil during its year of rest. They also canceled their community supported agriculture program and focused their educational programs on the Jewish texts and traditions of “shmita” and the importance of rest for all beings.



The farm at the Pearlstone retreat in Reisterstown, Md., during the ‘shmita’ year.
Adrienne Krone

The Hallelujah Diet

Another group I studied were followers of the Hallelujah Diet, a plant-based diet rooted in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. In “The Hallelujah Diet,” first published in 2006, the Rev. George Malkmus determined that the ideal food system was laid out in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, where God instructs humans to eat plants, fruits and seeds. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve would not have had access to cooked food, so the Hallelujah Diet also prioritizes the consumption of raw, uncooked vegan foods.

I attended a Hallelujah Diet health retreat in Lake Lure, North Carolina, in 2015 with nine followers of the Hallelujah Diet. This was a small subset of Hallelujah dieters. In the summer of 2013, I attended a talk by George Malkmus in Charlotte, North Carolina, along with hundreds of Hallelujah dieters.

Religion scholar Annie Blazer found that followers of the Hallelujah Diet tend to believe that it will cure their ailments and help them lead long and healthy lives. I found that the reality is a bit more complicated.

The retreat guests were adopting the diet in the hope that it would help them address medical issues, but they were not solely relying on the diet to heal them. The retreat guests were also seeing healthcare professionals and taking medications, recovering from or scheduling surgeries, and visiting physical therapists.

Baldwin Beef

The fourth site I studied was Baldwin Beef, a family-owned cattle farm that produced 100% grass-fed beef in Yanceyville, North Carolina. The Baldwins are Christian and raise their cows in line with their understanding that, according to the Bible, cows are meant to live on pasture and eat grass.

Cows at Baldwin Beef, a cattle farm in Yanceyville, N.C., which produces 100% grass-fed beef. Adrienne Krone

This differs from the more common practice in the United States of moving cattle to feedlots for their final months and feeding them grain. The Baldwins also collaborated with a smaller-scale halal slaughterhouse to ensure that their cows experienced less stress in their final moments.

Christians and many other religious Americans have been wrestling with their relationship with animals and the ethics of eating meat since the 19th century. Many contemporary religious and nonreligious movements are reconsidering current animal welfare practices. In some cases, this means advocacy for vegetarianism or veganism and in others it means working to address issues in animal agriculture.

Free-range religion

I use the term “free-range religion” in my book’s title for a reason: Americans belong to many communities at once, including religious communities, and the boundaries between communities are often porous.

For example, on the surface, the Hallelujah Diet book appears to be a Christian diet, written by a reverend. But I found that the reality was more complicated.

At the Hallelujah Diet health retreat I attended, all the participants were Christian – except for me, I'm Jewish – but the leaders of the retreat were Messianic Jews, who identify as Jews but believe Jesus was the Messiah. During our time at the retreat, we encountered a number of theological differences within our group, but our hosts encouraged us to remain focused on our shared interest in improving our bodily health.

In our educational sessions, medical doctors were cited as sources alongside biblical prophets, reflecting the range of authorities Hallelujah dieters recognize. The retreat participants similarly incorporated an array of practices into their daily lives, including yoga, meditation and the use of essential oils.

They saw some of these practices as part of their spiritual practice, while others were curtained off as "new age" and were seen as practices they engaged in outside of their Christianity.

Food and purity

As British anthropologist Mary Douglas demonstrated many decades ago in "Purity and Danger," religion plays a central role in food choices as communities make determinations about what is considered clean and unclean. For many religious communities, food rules bring them together through shared values and identities but also separate them from others.

Produce at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. Adrienne Krone

That is certainly happening today. Many communities still use food as a way to establish boundaries for membership. Jewish communities, for example, regularly establish rules around what people can bring to events to preserve the kosher status of synagogue kitchens. The kosher laws include restrictions on the types of meat that can be consumed and prohibits mixing meat and dairy in the same meal, so keeping a kitchen kosher requires communal adherence to these rules.

But these food decisions are also bringing religious and nonreligious people together in interesting ways and creating new collaborations in their efforts to transform the food system. The Jewish farmers from Adamah and Pearlstone are now part of a large umbrella organization, also called Adamah, that engages in interfaith climate advocacy work at national and international levels.

All of the groups I studied identified a concern regarding the food system. For the Jewish farmers, it was that Jews had become disconnected from food production. For the Hallelujah dieters, it was a concern that people were not eating the diet that they believed humans were created by God to eat in the Garden of Eden. For the Baldwin family, it was a concern that modern beef production did not align with biblical descriptions of cattle grazing on green pastures.

For these religious people, the solution was to start a farm or a diet that would provide a pathway for people to choose a different relationship with food or food production. These groups started small, with changes to their individual diets and commitments that shape their own approaches to producing food, but they all aspire to improving the entire food system.

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