

**Title:** A Grain of Truth: The Spirituality of Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

**Program of Study:** English

**Presentation:** PowerPoint

**Mentor:** Dr. Marybeth Baggett ([mdavis@liberty.edu](mailto:mdavis@liberty.edu))

**Student:** Carissa Johnson ([cjohnson43@liberty.edu](mailto:cjohnson43@liberty.edu))

**Category:** Textual

**Abstract:** This paper explores the intersection of food and faith in a contemporary novel, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The novel describes a family's journey in the South Asian diaspora from Calcutta to America, and meals play a significant role in their new lives. Food forms each individual's identity and binds them together in community, especially for this immigrant couple and their second-generation children. The spirituality of the food-centered ceremonies is not foregrounded in Lahiri's descriptions of the family, but these practices clearly reflect their relationship to their culture and to their Hindu faith. Understanding the religious significance in addition to the cultural or political meaning of food and eating can provide a deeper reading of the novel, its many allusions to Hindu traditions, and its faith-filled characters. This novel portrays food rituals and traditions that hold significance in Bengali Hindu culture, and these practices also represent the universal spiritual truth that is available in the sharing and consuming of food. This study is important because the relationship between a religion and its food practices helps reveal its values. Hindu scholar Chitrita Banerji writes, "In order to live, you must love [Krishna] every day with food." How can a person love a deity through food? This question demands an answer—not only from eastern religions, but from a Christian perspective as well. Jesus is the Bread of Life, and believers eat of His body. There is truth and meaning in the plurality of religious traditions' common emphasis on the spirituality of food. Food is a

conduit, so to speak, for spiritual experiences in this physical body; reading *The Namesake* from this perspective offers a stronger understanding of a contemporary classic. Within a discussion on *The Namesake*, this paper will seek to draw out that spiritual meaning and glean understanding about food and faith in the world today by exploring the universal truths found in this area of study.

**Christian worldview integration:** This study is deeply rooted in Christian values and biblical truths for several reasons. Food not only meets a daily human need; it also reflects man's spiritual condition. Hungering and thirsting, bread and water, and communion at the table are biblical metaphors that point Christians to something higher—the human need for more than physical sustenance, but spiritual sustenance as well. Christians who ignore this spiritual connection lose a vital and rich portion of their spiritual lives. This study unveils the impact of food in Christian tradition and how it intersects with Eastern traditions such as the Bengali Hindu tradition in *The Namesake*; in reading literature from this lens, one can find divine truth. In addition, this study highlights the depth that sharing food can bring to Christian community. Communion is sacramental and fundamental to the Christian walk, and community can have spiritual significance in other faiths as well, as characters in *The Namesake* discover. Also, as traditional keepers of the home, women have a unique and even divine role in food preparation; this paper analyzes the role of Ashima, the mother figure in *The Namesake*, as she fills this position in the household. Several studies have pointed out the role of food and ceremonial rituals in *The Namesake*, but the connection between this novel and the Christian worldview is appropriate and useful. American culture can generally benefit from a more spiritual understanding of food. This paper contributes to Christianity and to literary scholarship by offering glimpses of the divine through a cultural reading of literature.