

BOX 10.1

Food Matters: Religious Food Taboos

Why do Jews and Muslims avoid eating pork? The emic (internal) answer calls pigs “dirty” and disease-carrying. In seeking an etic (external) answer, anthropologist Marvin Harris (1985) examines the environmental conditions in which these religions developed. As mentioned earlier in this text, his framework, **cultural materialism**, focuses on the interaction of people and their environments.

Harris explains that the pig was not well adapted to the dry, hot grasslands of the Middle East where the early Abrahamic religions developed. It was used to shadier, wetter climates in which it could keep a cool body temperature (pigs have no sweat glands, making them poorly adapted to a desert-like environment). Not only must

humans provide shelter and water to keep pigs cool, but pigs also compete for resources, eating the foods that humans live on. In contrast, cows, sheep, and goats live happily on pasture, leaving grains for human consumption.

As farming expanded, suitable habitat for pigs decreased. It became too costly to raise pigs for meat, which is a pig’s only real product. You can’t milk a pig easily. It’s hard to imagine trying to wear clothing made of pig hair like you can with the wool of a sheep. Thus, they became codified in religious law as unsuitable to eat. In this way, the ban on pork among Jews and Muslims supported the expansion of farms and the raising of pasture animals, which were “good to eat.”