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## Teaching and Theorizing Religion and Food

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I love to eat. It's an important part of my life. I eat every day. Since I was born, it's been a daily activity. In fact, I've yet to meet a person who doesn't eat (at least a *living* person; and I know of some cultures where even the dead eat). In addition to the succulent experiences of consumption, I also love to cook. It's a passion. I enjoy jumping into my kitchen, throwing open cupboards, grabbing random ingredients, and, while dancing around to old Queen tunes, just seeing what emerges from the flurry that ensues.

This whimsical opening is not just playful; it taps into an unstated insight: food and foodways matter. Yet food is often overlooked as data in the study of religion. A few years ago, I was asked to design a course for a university core program—and the department chair gave me almost complete freedom to come up with whatever I wanted. As I was dancing around listening to Queen and tossing ingredients, I glanced over my collection of cookbooks. I have several “world religions” cookbooks and the thought hit me: why not use them as textbooks? Food matters, I thought. And religion often intersects food and foodways. We don't usually consider the role of food in what often gets called “religion”—except, perhaps, when dealing with dietary restrictions (kosher, halal, or vegetarianism). But is that all there is? So, I designed my course: *Cooking Religion: Food, Culture, and Community*. It was a hit with my students.

Through that course I learned that not only is food an important part of religion, but that religion is often constructed, normalized, migrated, and literally internalized through food. We explored the world religions paradigm, colonialism, tourism, migration, and the formal and informal uses of food. Economic systems are as relevant as systems of mythologizing. Social structures, along with gender roles and ethnic identities, were studied. In the end, food really did matter. I ran that course several times and it was a fantastic experience for me as a teacher and a scholar—and not only as a foodie.

From that course, I decided to expand the conversation with other scholars working on food and religion. In recent years there has been a surprising rise of interest in the topic. Not only has there been a flurry of publications in book and article formats,

but scholars are tackling the topic with greater theoretical refinement. The AAR Food and Religion group, with an active community on Facebook, is illustrative of the attention being directed to food and religion. I think that food is significant because it focuses our analysis on what is being called “lived religion”; not, for me at least, in the sense of a second naivety privileging emic perspectives and caretaking religious traditions. Rather, by analyzing food, we can look at how religion is constructed, internalized, and played out by real social actors in actual social settings. Unlike some social processes, food is unique. It stands on the margins, often beyond the visual scope of those “playing out” their religious roles. I think that these tacit cultural elements contribute even more to religious identity construction than overt “religious” practices, be that in ritual or sacred text performance. In my teaching, I discovered that the course was less a “religious studies” course (in the typical sense of that department's offerings) and more a “cultural studies” course that intersected a range of disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and social questions.

This issue of the *Bulletin* brings together a dynamic group of scholars who are part of such conversations. The focus of these articles is largely on teaching, but, as with any good pedagogy, they each engage various theoretical issues relevant to the study of religion and culture. The articles by Martha Finch, Rachel Diane Brown, Emily Bailey, Jason Ellsworth, and Aldea Mulhern offer insights not only into their own research and teaching on religion and food, but also suggestions for those who may wish to teach such a course or incorporate such data into their scholarship. I invite readers to pull up a chair and to dine away on these intellectual delicacies. Our hope is that this thematic issue will only be a sampling, encouraging readers to join an ongoing conversation as we theorize and teach about religion, food, foodways, and cultural identity formation.

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Editor