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Book Review

David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010), 207 pp., $39.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-415-49683-4.

Eating is a form of communication. By watching what people eat and with whom, noting who does the cooking and clean-up, observing how the growers and harvesters are valued, and attending to the conditions of fields and factory-farm animals, we get a fairly clear sense for a culture's moral and religious codes.

This means that food is not confined to the kitchen or the dining table. The diverse dimensions of food's production, processing, and consumption influence and are worked out in economic and political policy, gender roles, land policy, human and ecological health, and artistic and religious life. Because of food's wide cultural and environmental reach, we should not be surprised that throughout the centuries Christian theologians and leaders have spent considerable time thinking about menus and dinner tables. It can be convincingly argued that getting the menu 'right' means that a lot else in our economies, communities, and habitats will also be corrected. What I find surprising, however, is that so few theological ethicists spend time reflecting on food.

For those interested in the nascent, theological discussion on food, *Theology on the Menu* will be a valuable resource. Co-authors David Grumett (University of Exeter) and Rachel Muers (University of Leeds) have set out to recover and examine Christian dietary practices as a way to unsettle some of the assumptions and terms of today's food debates. The book does not offer a single normative view of 'the Christian diet' but rather, provides a historical account of the diverse ways Christians have thought about eating. In particular, they have focused on religious practices and their rationales, including traditions of asceticism, and the complexity surrounding meat eating. The book contends that 'Food issues are not just about healthy eating, but about how humans live under God' (p. x). Today's food debates would be greatly enriched if debaters spent some time with Grumett and Muers.

Theology on the Menu begins with a description of Christian asceticism as it was practiced in wilderness conditions. Significant numbers moved to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria so that they could devote themselves to lives of prayer and simplicity. Their eating reflected the values of retreat, fasting, and abstinence (especially from eating mammals). For inspiration they looked to the scriptural witness of people such as John the Baptist. The reasons for such abstinence were varied, ranging from a desire not to participate in temple rituals to the fear that eating meat aroused improper, insatiable desires. Their primary concern was not animal welfare but the discipline of the body. Though anchorites (religious hermits) spoke often about sexual lust, their primary target was gluttony. As the biblical story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden shows, gluttony is the primary sin from which other sin flows. Desert life was esteemed because it was understood as a school for the cultivation of virtue, a school in which dietary practices were central.

As solitary anchorites began to band together and form monasteries, food rules became more codified. The extreme asceticism sometimes found in the desert could also be moderated. Dietary rules were important because they fostered a sense of identity among community members. Depending on where the monasteries were located, diets could also vary to reflect changing social and ecological contexts. Monasteries influenced the wider social spheres with which they had contact, bringing about social transformation in, for instance, practices of fasting and human relations with animals. Monks, as well as Christians in the wider society, 'embraced asceticism precisely because of the social, political and economic transformations it effected' (p. 17). Dietary practices thus contributed to the ordering of society by bringing together liturgical (Lent as a time of fasting) and seasonal (late winter and early spring when food cellars were depleted) calendars.

Monastic movements were hardly uniform in their practices, however. Depending on time and circumstance, monastic orders sometimes subscribed to a diet that resembled upper-class laypeople. Sometimes this was a concession to the wider culture, but changes also grew out of the desire to be hospitable to visitors. On other occasions, theological debate about the merit of any human effort intervened, suggesting that fasting might become a way to demonstrate righteousness through works.

Grumett and Muers do a fine job of showing how radical religious groups in modernity contributed to the development of 'vegetarianism'. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, for instance, spoke frequently about and practiced abstinence from eating meat. His exhortation, however, like that of other radical vegetarian groups, did not have widespread public effect. Mainstream Protestant Christianity, for the most part, did not take up the public mantle of advocating for ascetic dietary practices as had earlier Christian communities.

Much of the second half of *Theology on the Menu* is devoted to a treatment of animals, how they are to be classified and thus treated, and whether they are to be eaten. A discussion of Jewish dietary laws is followed by descriptions of Christian responses to the Jewish codes and to traditions of animal sacrifice. In these chapters we find provocative questions raised about the meaning and nature of food, as well as the purity of bodies and the orthodoxy of belief. How is food as a 'gift' different from food as a 'commodity'? What does it say about our world that for us to live, other creatures must die? Can the slaughter of animals be practiced while still honoring the gift of life? What happens to the way we think of ourselves if eating is assumed to be without rules? Must we not rethink the significance of gluttony in a context of gross excess and debilitating starvation and scarcity?

This book contains much more historical detail than can be covered in this brief review. Grumett and Muers show that it would be difficult if not impossible to expect that Christians will develop a single, normative Christian diet for the simple reason that Christianity's past, as well as its association with various contexts and religious traditions, has been so diverse. This book will enhance understanding of the multiple ways we configure the relationships we have with our own and other species. It demonstrates a wide range of ways that food choices are of profound moral and religious significance.

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