

Food and Religion

ANNE VALLELY

University of Ottawa

avallely@uottawa.ca

Food is the most basic of human needs and as such, is at the centre of the drama of life and death: its abundance signals prosperity whereas its absence spells destruction. The boisterousness of life rests precariously on the presence of food, and quickly falls silent when food disappears. Famines, droughts, plagues and war bring civilizations to their knees through the absence or withdrawal of food. Our vulnerability and dependence on food makes it an obvious and potent signifier of the “good”: whether through elaborate feasting or the offering of a cup of tea, the exchange of food carries the symbolic weight of an endorsement. Food offerings are immediate and obvious material sanctions of all that is worth preserving.

Because of its primordial importance, food’s symbolic associations are found underpinning all aspects of human experience and imagination. Food links us vertically and imaginatively to the ultimate source of life. As the concrete, literal sustainer of individual life, food’s association with the mysterious source and sustainer of all existence is commonplace across religious traditions. For many, food is understood to be the material manifestation of that ultimate source. In the Hindu tradition, this is often made explicit. Food and the goddess are homologized so that food (*anna*) is understood to be the material expression of the Goddess Anna, the Giver of all sustenance. Food is offered to gods and goddesses and returned as *prasād*, sanctified and transformed by the power of the deity. In the Catholic Mass, humble bread is transformed through the miracle of transubstantiation to become the body of God. And in many indigenous traditions, the food that sustains the body is inseparable from the spirit that animates and circulates through all life. When food is understood in this way, namely as a vessel containing the sacred, its ethical procurement and circulation is of paramount significance, as we see in the essay on the Dene, explored by Walsh. In Abrahamic traditions, by way of contrast, food is more commonly conceived of as the outcome of a human partnership with God, the “fruit” of a relationship made possible through God’s benevolence but dependent upon human effort (as discussed by Armstrong in her work on Christian farmers). The world renouncing tradition of Jainism, whose goal is release from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), reveals an alternate orientation to food, but one

that ultimately affirms the equation of food with life, fertility and sociality. It is precisely because food represents such a powerful and condensed symbol of *saṃsāra* that it must be mastered and eventually renounced. Fasting (non-consumption of food) for Jains is the surest way to break free of all worldly attachments.

And finally, because food serves as such a powerful symbol of life—one that so potently links us imaginatively to the ultimate source of life—it is not surprising that the killing for food is nearly everywhere problematized and governed by ethical injunctions. For some, this takes the form of religious vegetarianism; the total exclusion of animals from the category of food. Donaldson's paper examines the practices of those who, by defining animals as "inedible," challenge their own tradition's normative assumptions about what constitutes an ethical life.

Food also links us horizontally, forging trans-historical and trans-geographical ties, collapsing time and space, and binding us in reciprocal webs of care that make society possible. Anthropologists have long noted its centrality in the literal and symbolic creation of human communities: food is the medium through which allegiances are forged, and social bonds strengthened. As early as 1880s, William Robertson Smith argued that the ritual of sharing food marked the co-emergence of human community and religion. The collective meal birthed the idea of the group, and gave rise to the rituals and cosmologies ("religion") that sanctified it. Smith famously stated, "Religion did not exist for saving souls but for the preservation and welfare of society" (1956, 28). Although the evolutionism and reductionism of Smith's argument is no longer fashionable, his identification of food with the formation of moral communities is incontrovertible. Food defines group membership. Cross-culturally, the symbolic purity of the social body is maintained, in large part, through adherence to dietary practices that serve the rhetorical tool of belonging and make possible the practices of social inclusion and exclusion. Food has the power to define membership, as the ethnographically informed essays by Marshall (on Chinese and Filipino "restaurant religion"), Joseph (on Iraqi Jewish cookbooks) and Brown (on dietary practices of Muslims in France and Quebec) so clearly demonstrate. Arguably, nothing has the power to signify more powerfully and more polyvalently than does food. As the builder of bodies and meaning, it is at the centre of all human cosmologies, ethics and social imaginings.

Among the Tłı̨chǫ Dene First Nation of the Northwest Territories, food is the means through which all meaningful bonds of reciprocity are enacted. In "Feeding the Fire: Food and Reciprocity among the Dene," David Walsh explains how the gifts by animals of their bodies as food enables the Dene to fulfill their obligations of care to each other and to their ancestors, who in turn ensure the fertility of the land. Bodies offered and respectfully killed become the food that nourishes the human and nonhuman agencies, and binds them together in a living community. The world is sustained through acts of giving, and it is in this flow, Walsh insists, that Dene spirituality is most plainly articulated. Walsh critiques the common understanding of "religion"—an entity to which

people adhere through allegiance to a set of propositional claims—as an anemic abstraction disconnected from lived experience. It in, religion becomes a type of mental exercise, a second order reflection on life, rather than the active participation in the drama of life and death itself. The Dene do not so much “believe” in ancestors as they actively seek to ensure their vitality through the procuring and sharing of food with them. By “feeding the fire” with the yield from the hunt, ancestors are nourished and offered gratitude for their participation in the circulation of life. For the Dene, food is not just sustenance, it is the primary means of communication between humans, ancestors, animals, land, and water, binding all together in a community. “To focus on food,” Walsh writes, “[is] to focus on religion as practice.” Dene spirituality is not located in a doctrine or belief, but rather is observed in the ethically-informed activities of nourishing bodies—human and nonhuman, visible and invisible—so as to ensure the continued and vigorous flow of life.

No less than the Dene, Christian farmers are concerned with maintaining the health and reproductive capacity of the plants, animals and land on which they depend for their survival. But as Suzanne Armstrong argues in “Dominion in Christian Farming,” it is the transformation of land into food that is their central preoccupation. Food is not simply given; it is the outcome of human intelligence and hard work applied to the land and, as such, it unavoidably constitutes a relationship with God. It follows that the privileges, obligations and responsibilities of that relationship are of enormous importance to Christian farmers who seek to base their lives, including their farming practices, on biblical principles. Armstrong’s research among the Christian Farmer Federation of Ontario (CFFO), an organization founded in the 1950s by Dutch neo-Calvinist immigrants, reveals that the ethics of food production is the stuff of lively debate among its members. Her work examines the central and guiding role that the theological concepts of stewardship and dominion continue to play in the lives of Christian farmers. In particular, she explores the resilience of the concept of dominion, in defiance of its severe critique by those outside of farming as an expression of outmoded anthropocentrism, to reveal its adaptiveness in the face of dramatic technological changes and, at least for most farmers, its unproblematic compatibility with environmental responsibility.

In “From Ancient Vegetarianism to Contemporary Advocacy: When Religious Folks Decide that Animals Are No Longer Edible,” Brianna Donaldson explores humanity’s widespread concern, even apprehension, over the killing of animals for food. Such unease can be observed across diverse religious expressions, and is not confined to a particular culture or historical period. For instance, unease about killing may underlie the widespread view that animals are complicit in their deaths, nodding in assent to be slaughtered, as ancient Greek sacrificial animals are depicted, or willingly offering themselves to the hunter, as most traditional hunters insist. Unease about killing may inform the great number of ethical injunctions that circumscribe indigenous hunting; it may underpin the Biblical prescription of an exclusively plant-based diet in Genesis 1:29, just as it might the Vedic insistence on defining as non-violent the sacrifice of ani-

mals. Finally, unease about killing may have given rise to the largely vegetarian ideal within the Upanishads and Jainism. Despite variability in their appraisals religious traditions have never been casual about killing and typically frame its undertaking within a cosmological account that furnishes its rationale. It seems that it is only with the emergence of industrialized agriculture and the near total commodification of life, that killing for food becomes routine, blasé, and ironically, without need for moral justification. By examining a wide selection of texts, philosophies, practices and movements across traditions and historical (including contemporary) periods, Donaldson demonstrates that the question of killing for food has been anything but marginal to the ethical reflections of humanity. Even if the normative positions of most traditions settled on the ethics of killing, Donaldson shows that vibrant counterpoints have always existed. She provides a sympathetic examination of these “minoritarian voices” that have positioned themselves alongside marginalized animals in their efforts to challenge the normative assumptions about what constitutes food.

Food reveals itself to be an indispensable component of community building and religious identity in the essays by Brown, Marshall and Joseph. Alison Marshall in “From the Goddess Guanyin to Señor Santo Niño: Chinese and Filipino Restaurant Religion in Canada” explores the place of the restaurant in community formation and in the devotional practices of Chinese and Filipino immigrants to Canada. She weaves together historical and ethnographic material to create fictionalized but “typical” portraits of Chinese and Filipino immigrant experiences, highlighting the phenomenon of “restaurant religion”—that is, the practice of maintaining altars for one’s ancestors and/or deities within the confines of one’s place of business. Though the immigrant experiences of the Chinese and Filipino communities differed considerably, the restaurant played a similar function in both, helping to establish recognizable roles and financially secure positions in Canadian society, as well as providing for the creation of sacred space that was readily accessible, familiar and (for early Chinese migrants) concealed from the public. The deities (and ancestors) that adorned the Filipino but especially Chinese altars were at first alien to most Canadians and, for this reason, their invisibility was important. For immigrants fearful of ostracism, living in an environment where racism was normative, the separation of the public restaurant from the private kitchen altar was crucial. Marshall discusses how the gradual emergence of the goddess Guanyin (among others), from the private kitchen to that of the public space of the Chinese restaurant marks important political and demographic shifts in Canadian society, as well as reveals the Chinese community’s more secure sense of belonging. Filipino restaurants, by way of contrast, began to open in large numbers (mainly in Western Canada) in the era of government-endorsed multiculturalism of the 1990s. Lacking the self-consciousness of the early Chinese immigrant experience, Filipino altars (for example, to Señor Santo Niño) are prominently displayed in restaurants. The differences in their “restaurant religion,” Marshall’s argues, can be explained, at least in part, by the political and cultural context of their emergence.

In “Cookbooks are Our Texts: Reading an Immigrant Community Through Their Cookbooks,” Norma Baumel Joseph makes a strong case for considering cookbooks as evidentiary documents, worthy of greater scholarly attention. In many regards, they do what scriptures and other texts cannot: they afford us a glimpse into the rhythms of (mainly women’s) religious lives in their immediacy, intimacy and concreteness. Praxis and ideology merge in the preparation and sharing of food, to reveal the way the stuff of daily life—including devotional practices, social customs, gender patterns, folklore *et cetera*—is closely intertwined with the preparation of traditional meals. But unlike the meals they inspire, cookbooks endure. They become, in Joseph’s words, “permanent displays of an indigenous heritage.” As such they possess considerable scholarly significance, revealing, among other things, patterns of cultural accommodation and assimilation, the reality of cultural diversity, variations in religious practice and competing sources of authority. More importantly, they become cherished sources of culinary, religious, and cultural information for the communities themselves, passed on from one generation to the next. For migrant communities, threatened with cultural loss, cookbooks represent much more than the transmission of particular know-how, they become a tangible link to the past.

Joseph is interested in the role cookbooks play in cultural adaptation and continuity. Her work reveals their capacity to act as cultural repositories of worlds lost, vanishing or simply changing, making them simultaneously important scholarly resources, precious cultural artifacts, and crucial factors in a community’s continuity. In this essay, Joseph looks at the place of cookbooks in the Iraqi Jewish experience of migration and adaptation to Canadian society. The community fled to Montreal in the 1950s after an abrupt and painful displacement from Iraq, home to a Jewish community since the time of the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE). The experience of forced migration left the community deeply nostalgic and anxious about its ability to preserve its Iraqi heritage. One of the most concrete ways in which this longing is expressed is through the practice of preparing and consuming foods that purposefully elicit memories of an Iraqi Jewish past. Joseph writes, “their food traditions remain a strong element of their personal identity today and substantiate the strength of their communal perseverance. Food maintains much of their “Iraqi-ness.” Interestingly, in Iraq these foodstuffs did not define them religiously or ethnically as Jews, as they were foods common to all Iraqis—Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In Canada, they have taken on new significance as important markers of an identity in need of preservation, and Joseph explores the indispensable role that cookbooks play in that effort.

The final contribution to this edition continues with the theme of food, religious identity and migration, this time focused on the community of Maghrebine Muslims. In “How Gelatin Becomes an Essential Symbol of Muslim Identity: Food Practice as a Lens into the Study of Religion and Migration” Rachel Brown analyzes the role that food plays in identity negotiations and migration dynamics of Muslim immigrants living in Paris and Montreal. On the basis of ethnographic work among both communities, she argues that the context of

reception of the host societies has a crucial, even determining, influence on the religious lives of immigrants, which can be fruitfully observed in a community's food practices. Food is a powerful signifier of identity but it is also malleable, and this combination makes it highly sensitive to context: it can be emphasized and publicly consumed if doing so facilitates integration, dignity or cultural/religious resistance; it can be downplayed or reserved for private consumption if its public presence elicits censure or shame, or if one's religious identity becomes uniquely privatized. Because of food's power to symbolize, "religious" food practices are commonly adopted as a way of identifying with, and asserting, group membership, even by the "non religious." Many of Brown's Parisian informants engage in "Muslim" food practices as a way of identifying group membership, even though they do not consider themselves to be practicing Muslims. Indeed, many became aware of such practices only after immigrating to France. Muslim dietary practices are being harnessed as a strategy of cultural resistance by migrants who suddenly find themselves representatives of a minority, in a less than hospitable cultural setting. Brown writes that in Paris "Halal becomes a "known thing," a "common element" that helps a community to identity itself when in a context where their identity is challenged or in question." In Montreal, by contrast, a host context where religious observances are far less contested, Brown notes that religious food practices are adopted as a way of strengthening and highlighting religious identity. Unlike in Paris, where such practices are often done as form of resistance, in Montreal, they are adopted as a way of showcasing their religious difference. Food observances may even become far more stringent, as the community seeks to distinguish itself from majority practices. For example, Brown discusses the fastidious avoidance of gelatin that, for many of her Montreal informants, is now a basic way of being Muslim in Canada. Fascinatingly, Brown argues that such efforts actually serve to facilitate national integration, given Canada's positive embrace of multiculturalism and religious diversity. In sum then, Brown's study, much like Joseph's and Marshall's, reveals food to be as a singularly powerful lens onto the dynamics of identity formation, as well as a barometer of sorts, revealing broader trends in the religious lives of migrants.

The essays in this volume reveal food to be a perennially fertile source of symbolic meaning: it nourishes bodies, communicates with the dead, materializes blessings, defines group membership, shores up identity, kindles memory, and safeguards cultures from disappearance. Food, it would seem, is a particularly potent medium through which we satisfy our most urgent needs for bodily wellbeing, community and ultimately, for relationship.

References

Smith, Robertson. 1956 [1889]. *Religion of the Semites*. New York: Meridian.