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Food for Theologians

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Abstract

In this essay, I present eating as a vital theological concern and an integral part of the church's ministries and mission in the world. I argue that food is not reducible to the status of a commodity but is instead God's love made delectable. The production and the sharing of good food is a witness to God's presence among us.

Keywords

Food, Eating, Agriculture, Hospitality, Health, Land, Fellowship, Vegetarianism

Introduction

Food is now on the agenda for a growing number of theologians. An increasing number of books and articles are being written that consider what we eat, how food is grown and distributed, how we eat it, and with whom, all from a distinctly Christian point of view. This essay will explore possible reasons for why this is happening. It will also suggest how theological reflection is enriched when food is on the table.

One might think food concerns are an instance of theologians responding to a popular movement within consumer culture that is clearly interested—perhaps even obsessed—with eating. Though bookstores have long had shelves devoted to cookbooks with luscious photography and exotic recipes, the shelves have clearly lengthened and strained under the weight of books that profile everything from special diets and regional cuisine to eating as a way of simpler and more healthy living. Besides cookbooks, however, there are numerous television shows—the Food Network alone profiles over 120 programs—now on offer that variously present cooking as a high-octane, competitive sport (“The Next Iron Chef”), as nostalgia for a disappearing and well-nigh lost way of American life (“The Pioneer Woman”), or as a celebration of the miracle of sugar (“Sweet Genius”). Billions of dollars are spent each year on publishing and programming *about* food. Billions more are spent by marketers and companies that want you to buy their particular food product (from among the tens of thousands of food products available). This is before a single dime has been spent on food itself.

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It would be a mistake, however, to think that the explosion of interest in food and the proliferation of exotic, and often very expensive, food preferences are reducible to new forms of gluttony. We can expect that a multibillion dollar industry would find ever more creative and profitable ways to entice consumers to buy food and food-related products that are unhealthy and unjust. But we should not overlook the fact that a vital strand in today's conversation about food attends to matters of fundamental, perennial, and profound concern. Writers like Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, Marion Nestle, and Raj Patel, and movies like *Food Inc.*, *Fresh*, and *Hungry for Change*¹ have shown us that today's industrial and increasingly global food system undermines human health, mistreats food service and agricultural workers, destroys agricultural communities, abuses animals, and degrades agricultural lands and the ecosystems they depend upon.² In other words, an interest in food should not be confined to whatever food product shows up on a plate. The moment eaters reflect upon food and what they are doing when they eat, they also discover that they must look beyond the plate to the kitchens, gardens, restaurants, distribution centers, factories, watersheds, and fields that make their eating possible. To eat is never simply to do one thing. The moment anyone takes a bite, the eater is by necessity also involved in processes marked by ethnic, racial, gendered, economic, agricultural, and ecological concern. Eating is a gustatory, physiological act. But it is also so much more.

Food is a system of communication revealing what we believe and value about people, things, bodies, traditions, time, money, and places. Today's fast food culture, for instance, suggests that what some people most care about is that food be cheap, convenient, "cool," and available in copious amounts. We do not want to have to think much about where food comes from or under what conditions it was made available. The term "service industry" indicates that we feel ourselves above the need to work directly for our own nurture.³ The Slow Food movement, however, communicates that particular foods, and the ethnic and work traditions that make them possible, need to be honored and celebrated. That means eaters should be intentional about food production, preparation, and sharing, all with the aim of savoring the tastes of local traditions and protecting the agricultural lands and communities that make them possible.⁴

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- 1 *Food, Inc.* (Directed by Robert Kenner; Magnolia Pictures, 2009); *Fresh* (Produced/directed by Ana Sofia Joanes; 2009); *Hungry for Change* (Produced/directed by James Colquhoun and Larentine ten Bosch; 2012).
 - 2 For an introduction to the seminal works in the now vast literature on today's industrial food system, see Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006); idem, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Marion Nestle's *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2007); and Raj Patel's *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2007).
 - 3 Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2005) was the first, widely influential treatment of the fast food industry.
 - 4 Carlo Petrini is widely acknowledged as the guru of the Slow Food movement. Among his many books, see *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2007). A wealth of information about the movement and its many chapters around the world can be found at <http://www.slowfood.com>. Accessed January 3, 2013.

To suggest that food carries multiple layers of moral, cultural, ecological, and religious significance does not mean that eaters are fully aware of what they are doing or what they are communicating when they eat. There can be a vast disconnect between what people believe and what they do, as when people profess a love of animals but then eat meat produced by an industry that systematically degrades them. Today's food industry presupposes a unique development in the history of eating: the near complete separation between food production and food consumption. Never before in human history have so few people had a direct hand in the growth, nurture, production, and preparation of the food they eat. That means that a considerable amount of eating happens in a cloud of ignorance in which eaters know little about where their food comes from, under what conditions it was produced, and what social, economic, and ecological conditions need to be in place to insure the healthy production of food well into the future.⁵

Viewed from this angle, today's growing interest in food is a welcome event, because it suggests that at least some people want to overcome food ignorance and thereby become more responsible eaters. Eating matters not only because it allows us to satisfy a gustatory, physiological need. It matters because eating is the most regular and intimate way in which we place ourselves in the world. It is the most fundamental way in which we connect our lives with others.⁶ When we eat responsibly—in ways that respect and honor fields, animals, agricultural communities, and food workers—we also contribute to the health and flourishing of the world. When we do not, we help precipitate the world's degradation.⁷

It may be hard for people, especially those living in more affluent neighborhoods, to believe that eating choices can have this wide effect. If a food consumer walks into a well-stocked grocery store with row upon row of attractively packaged food, it is difficult to imagine that there is much wrong with the system that brings this food to us. This is why it is so important to step beyond today's ignorant food consumer position and discover what is really going on. If we move, for instance, to one of many urban food deserts/swamps, we soon see the prejudice and racism at work that consigns poor people to severely limited options (convenience stores or gas stations) and unhealthy (highly processed and sugared and salted) food. If one moves to a farming community, one sees up close how the consumer desire for cheap food results in abused land (high rates of soil erosion and the heavy application of toxic herbicides); degraded and wasted water (from agro-chemical runoff and inefficient irrigation methods); abused animals (kept in cramped confinement and often fed a

5 Paul Roberts suggests in *The End of Food* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) that our collective ignorance, and thus also negligence, is putting sustainable production and the future of healthy food in jeopardy.

6 The basic desire to connect with others and one's neighborhood may go a long way toward helping us understand the growth of farmer's markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and restaurants that feature locally sourced and grown food.

7 For an up-to-date look at the role agriculture is playing in the healing of ecosystems, see The Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

steady diet of growth hormones and antibiotics); and abused agricultural workers (many of whom are poorly paid, undocumented, migrant workers with little or no worker benefits or protections). If we move to the pediatric office, we quickly learn about skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity and early-onset diabetes (through relentless advertising of high-fructose-laden foods directed specifically at children). If one travels to agricultural lands around the world, one may be surprised to discover that small farmers are being kicked off their land (so that foreign investors can buy soil to grow food for their own countries) or forced to grow commodities for export (to satisfy trade agreements) rather than food for themselves. And if one lives near many coastlines, one may discover that the ocean in that region has become a “dead zone” (suffocating aquatic life) owing to the nitrate run-off from agricultural production.

Enough has been said by now to help us see that food, along with the worlds of food production and consumption, can and should be of vital interest to Christians. Besides being a physiological act, eating takes us into the heart of the life-and-death dramas we witness in our homes, communities, and wide, wild world. Though it is certainly true that Jesus tells his followers, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear” (Matt 6:25), it would be a grave mistake to think that Jesus ignored bodies and their many needs, or despised the conditions that make creaturely life possible. If eating is the most primary way for enacting connections with others, we should not at all be surprised that Jesus spent much of his time eating with others—often the kinds of people whom convention said not to eat with—and providing food for them. Nor should we be shocked that fellowship around the Lord’s Table, fellowship that took the form of a meal, became a primary means for Christians to witness to God’s presence in the world.⁸ Eating is of vital significance for theological reflection because in this mundane practice people communicate, sometimes more honestly than their verbal piety, what they believe about themselves, their world, and their God.

To appreciate the difference a theological approach to food can make, we can start with a basic question: what is food? If one considers this question from the point of view of today’s industrial food system, then the answer is simple: food is a commodity. It is subject to the logics of volume, efficiency, and profitability that govern commodity production. Methods that increase volume, efficiency, and profitability are, therefore, clearly to be preferred as good.⁹ But is food reducible to a commodity?

It does not take much thought to recognize that a commodity narration of food reflects an impoverished imagination. People throughout the ages have loved food because of its ability to

8 Angel F. Méndez-Montoya develops a eucharistic approach to food in *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

9 Viewers of *Food, Inc.* may recall the scene in which a chicken processing plant manager praises a process that produces more chickens more cheaply in less time and at greater profit (for the chicken companies rather than the farmers). The life, integrity, and need of the chickens, and thus also their potential to be abused and degraded, is irrelevant because the chicken is not considered to be one of God’s creatures. It has been transformed into an “economic unit” playing an anonymous role in a business plan.

recall and reinforce family and ethnic traditions, and its power to create fellowship. When I teach a class on food and the life of faith, I often hear students say, “food *is* fellowship,” thereby indicating the indispensable presence of food in shared life together. The point is not only that important life moments—births, birthdays, graduations, weddings, funerals, etc.—feature good food and good company. It is that the sharing of food along the many stages of life’s way signifies the sharing of love and support, the sharing of one life in another. To bring food to another’s table is to communicate one’s care for them and to declare that one is committing oneself to their health and happiness. In other words, food nurtures on more than one level. It nurtures by feeding the body essential nutrients, but it also nurtures by building a community of responsibility and care, a community in which life *together* is affirmed as good. Nutrients and nurture, food and fidelity, come together in the sharing of a meal.¹⁰

When we turn to Scripture, we discover a deepening of the understanding that food is the material medium of love. In God’s creation of the world, we find God delighting in the world’s fertility and fecundity. God creates land that puts forth vegetation with plants yielding seed and trees bearing fruit with seed within it (Gen 1:11–12), and then proclaims that they have been made as the gift of food for every creature that has the breath of life (1:29–30). Similarly, in Gen 2:9, God plants vegetation that is “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” indicating that God finds pleasure in food that nourishes life. The presence of food is the intimate, material, mundane sign of God’s providential care.

One might try to imagine a world in which no creature ate, but this is not God’s world. Creation thrives because its members eat, and the food God provides is an expression of God’s desire that creatures find creation a good and beautiful place. We might say that one of the clearest and most basic signs of God’s presence in the world is that there is nutritious and tasty food to eat. When creatures cannot eat, or when they find that economic systems prevent groups from enjoying the food that God otherwise provides, it is a clear sign that God’s order has been violated or that our backs have been turned against God. Good food is a witness to God because *food is God’s love made delectable*. God creates food as the material, fully sensory promise of God’s abiding, nurturing, and celebratory presence among us.

This is not an easy or always cheery presence, however. To participate in food’s production, preparation, and presentation is eventually to have to confront the reality of life and death *together*. Death is not simply the end of life. It is life’s daily accompaniment. Death is regularly the *means* of life, because for any creature to live it must consume the life of another. Here, it is worth recalling the words of Cambridge Dean William Ralph Inge: “The whole of nature . . . is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and the passive.”¹¹ Though eating is a gift and a grace, it is important to remember that eating comes at a great cost. As every gardener will tell us, healthy and fertile growth

10 L. Shannon Jung has developed these themes in *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

11 Quoted in Leon Kass’s insightful philosophical rumination on eating in *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17.

can only arise out of the soil into which death regularly enters. Every act of eating raises an important and sobering question: how does any one of us become worthy of another's life *and* death?

This question introduces us to what is likely one of the most difficult and underdeveloped areas of theological research on food. Today's food industry does a masterful job hiding death from us. Meat purchased in today's grocery stores is often shorn of all traces of fur, feather, and blood. As a result, few of us are deeply aware of the life and death within each bite. Though we may "know" in some cognitive sense that others have died to make our eating possible, few experience or have first-hand appreciation for the life and death dramas within food. Are theological resources available to help us navigate this difficult terrain?

Traditions of sacrifice are one important place to turn.¹² But in making this recommendation, we must be aware that the language of sacrifice is open to justifiable criticism because it has been used to subjugate groups of people for all kinds of unholy ends. If we are to employ an account of sacrifice for understanding and living more faithfully in this world—by eating our way through it—then we are going to need to rethink sacrifice not as a tool of violent power or divine appeasement but as humble participation in God's own self-offering life. In other words, the essential movement of sacrifice is entirely missed if we do not appreciate how the sacrificial act is primarily an act of self-offering to God, an act in which we commit our time, resources, attention, and energy to the well-being of all that we offer to God and to each other (recall that Israelite temple practice required farmers and shepherds to bring healthy animals and first fruits rather than "leftovers," i.e., they offered the very seed-stock they would have depended on for their continuing livelihood).

The practical implications of this sacrificial understanding of eating are immense because they commit eaters to the promotion of the health and flourishing of whatever creatures we may eat. To eat meat in a way that honors God and the steer or the chicken or the pig presupposes that the animals have been well-cared for, their daily needs met, and their potential for life affirmed. Similarly, to eat vegetables or fruit with a sacrificial sensibility entails that fields and waterways and plants be properly gardened (Gen 2:15). When eating is informed by a sacrificial understanding, the very meaning and practical forms of agriculture change so that shepherding is modeled on God the Good Shepherd, and gardening is patterned on God the Gardener (cf. Gen 2:8 and Psalm 65).

Another important place to look for insight on receiving the gift of life and death is in the growing literature on vegetarianism.¹³ Theologians have been reflecting on the consumption of meat for some

12 In *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), I develop the theological significance of sacrifice as it relates to food's production and consumption.

13 A popular recent book that has put vegetarianism on the minds of many people is Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009). For a more philosophically developed account, see Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (New York: Rodale, 2006).

time.¹⁴ In part, this is because Christian traditions have long histories of fasting and renunciation that bring the consumption of meat directly to the fore.¹⁵ Arguments for and against vegetarianism can be very complex. Scripture does not give a single or monochrome view on the matter. On the one hand, it is fairly clear that the Genesis creation accounts present a veggie, non-carnivorous world, one in which people and animals seem to eat only plants, and that the prophets (see Isa 11:6–9) speak of a future peaceable kingdom in which predation has come to an end. But on the other hand, it is also clear that from the time of Noah onward, God also (with clear restrictions) gives animals to humans to eat. Moreover, there is little strong evidence that Jesus refrained from the eating of meat.¹⁶

Vegetarian arguments and practices, along with various disciplines of fasting, are so valuable because they are occasions for us to consider carefully not only our relation to food but also our relation to the world as a whole and to God.¹⁷ It is easy for habits of eating and living to become mindless, and thereby slide into patterns that are degrading or destructive of the life given to us as gift (a strong case could be made for how a consumerist approach to food, along with the ignorance and naïve confidence it encourages, is especially susceptible to destructive habit formation). To have to think carefully about what and why we eat what we do, and in whatever amounts, and then to commit to the discipline that exercises restraint so that a more hospitable stance in the world can grow, is a labor of the highest spiritual significance. If eating is a primary way of engaging and appropriating the life and death around us, then vegetarian and fasting practices have the potential to equip us to live more mindfully and charitably where we are.

Scholars in food studies have long observed that eating practices establish personal and communal identity. This is why marketers today work very hard to convince us that eating certain kinds of foods help establish one's style or persona. But well before now, we have known that ethnic and

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- 14 Seminal recent works in this area include Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Stephen Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001) and idem, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Richard A. Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?: Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1998); and the essay by Stanley Hauerwas and John Berkman, "The Chief End of All Flesh," *Theology Today* 49 (1992): 196–208.
- 15 Books to consider in this area include Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), and more recently, David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and the Christian Diet* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 16 For a fine assessment of the evidence and arguments, see David G. Horrell's essay, "Biblical Vegetarianism?: A Critical and Constructive Assessment," in *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (ed. David Grumett & Rachel Muers; London: T & T Clark, 2008), 44–59. *Eating and Believing* is an excellent collection of essays that moves the theological conversation on vegetarianism to a high level.
- 17 Recall that the first recorded sin in the Bible is an eating sin. According to the Desert Fathers, the inability of Adam and Eve to control their appetites led to a disordered relationship with the rest of the world. For more on this history, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 220–22.

racial groups observe dietary rules as a way of cultivating memory and tradition, and as a way of keeping people groups separate from each other (this is why historically some people have worried greatly about sharing the table with foreigners: eating together is worrisome to some because it leads to intermarriage and the disturbance of identity markers).

The scene in Acts where Peter is instructed in a vision to eat with the Gentile Cornelius makes this point powerfully. As a Jew, Peter knows there are certain foods he should not eat. But God says (repeatedly), “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:16), thus clearing the way for Peter to eat with everyone. This is a pivotal moment precisely because the sharing of food at table is the sharing of life and love. If Jesus is indeed to be the savior of the whole world, his mission would be rendered impossible from the start if people could only eat with their own kind and not also with others quite unlike themselves. The providing, nurturing love with which God created the whole world is, in some sense, to be witnessed at every table in which strangers are welcomed and food is shared. God’s love, in other words, knows no social, ethnic, gender, political, or cultural bounds. That means God’s table fellowship is radically open to all so that all have the chance to become, as Sam Wells puts it, God’s companions.¹⁸ The hospitality with which God founds and daily renews the world is to be extended through Christian communities that eat with anyone and everyone.

To consider eating with everyone as the breaking down of barriers between us need not mean that questions of identity are therefore obsolete or unimportant. The story of Peter in Acts 10 shows us that practices of exclusion, rather than practices of identity, are the problem that needs to be overcome. We should ask, therefore, if there are eating practices that follow from a Christian understanding of life and that might mark eaters as claiming a Christian identity? Is there such a thing as an identifiably Christian form of eating?

Questions like this are dangerous because they have been employed in the past against people as a way to exercise power over them. Consider, as but one example, how men have used theological arguments to control women’s bodies through eating.¹⁹ In cases like this, a “Christian diet” is proposed as a way to becoming a “Godly woman,” when in reality what is at work is a complex regimen of strategies (including highly questionable anthropological assumptions) for keeping women in their subordinate, and often humiliating, place by compelling them to be thin.

If we are to speak of Christian forms of eating, then we need to be wary of claims to specific diets. The history of the world’s eating practices suggests that a great variety of diets—with the

18 Sam Wells, *God’s Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

19 For further treatment of these matters, see the two books by Michelle M. Lelwica: *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems Among American Girls and Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers Behind Women’s Obsession with Food and Weight* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 2010). For a rich discussion of how medieval women mystics used food to make Christian claims of their own, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987).

possible exception of today's industrial, high-meat, high-fat, high-sodium, highly-sweetened diet—contribute to healthy human bodies. Rather than advocating for a narrow range of specific foods, a more helpful strategy may be to advocate for agricultural and economic practices that have the health of lands, plants, animals, and people foremost in view. Using shared health as the operative consideration—a consideration presupposed in much of Jesus' ministry, and clearly entailed within biblical characterizations of "salvation"—will naturally (though perhaps not easily) lead to food production and consumption practices that promote mutual flourishing and *shalom*.²⁰ If policies and practices of this sort were to be promoted by Christian communities, then that might well put us on the way to something like "Church Supported Agriculture" and the genuine fellowship at table (and beyond) that bears witness to God's loving and nurturing presence in the world. If Christian communities are to be known by their love for each other, then surely the eating they do—eating that always also includes attention to how food is grown, distributed, and shared—will also be a regular occasion to testify to God's life-giving Spirit in our midst.

The Acts of the Apostles records that early Christian communities participated in a common life together. They shared possessions and they sold things they did not need so that the proceeds could go to those in need. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46–47). This is a remarkable passage because it shows how the practices of eating and the sharing of food are at the heart of Christian life and mission. Sharing food is the sharing of God's love.²¹ Christians come regularly to the Lord's Table, give thanks and praise to God, and there consume Jesus as the Bread of Life (John 6) so that his followers can be transformed and nurtured from within to be Christ's continuing presence in the world. The eucharistic meal, in other words, transformed their daily eating so that every table could be an opportunity to incarnate and proclaim the gospel.

Jesus is the eternal Word through whom all things come to be. He is also the Bread of Life that nurtures people into full and abundant life. My sense is that the nature of theological reflection finds a profound challenge in this realization, because it suggests that Christians need to do more of their thinking with the stomach in mind. In other words, our most faithful and brilliant theological testaments may be found as much in a good meal—and therefore also a healthy agriculture and just food system—as in a good sermon or book.

20 In *Making Peace with the Land: God's Call to Reconcile with Creation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), Fred Bahnson and I describe how food production and consumption practices contribute to God's reconciling ways with the world.

21 In this context, it is important to underscore how, according to Scripture, the various practices of hospitality are a key indicator of faithful life. It is frequently remarked that in welcoming the stranger, one also potentially welcomes God (Matthew 25). What also needs stressing is that in offering food and nurture to another, one witnesses to God's presence in the love shown. God not only shows up in the stranger. God also appears in the loving offering of the food.