

## Food and Religion

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Religion requires alimentation. You could say it's necessary for your daily bread. But that is asking. There is also the ritual itself, which is giving. In complex written religions there is always food at some point, partly because regular celebrations are 'feasts', requiring the special preparations on an annual or weekly basis.

In Africa the gods are nourished by the same food as humans. I say 'nourished' because it is not clear that gods or shrines to whom sacrifices are made are actually thought to consume the food they are offered in sacrifice. People are not stupid. They can see whether it disappears or not. In most cases the food offered in sacrifice is generally consumed by those attending. The LoDagaa of northern Ghana leave only the blood of the animal, and perhaps a small portion of the liver, at the altar, the rest is cut up and handed around, in some cases 'snatched', by members of the congregation who fall into the right category. The division is formal, decided in advance, but it is carried out with noise and excitement at the prospect of meat. However not all sacrifices are treated in this way; some are considered so serious that the offering is thrown aside. The congregation cannot consume it so the carcass is left for the joking partners, those who have the 'capacity' to make hot things cool'. Not all offerings are meat. Beer (dāā) always accompanies the killing of an animal. But some offerings, especially at First Burial ceremonies, consist of grain. However, the neolithic societies of Africa are committed to animal sacrifice. Even the occasional animal expressly dedicated to the table would be killed in a formal way. It is as if the shedding of blood not only of humans (zii tfor in Dagara) but of animals, any taking of life, needs to be requited. The need to sacralize a killing seems one element in the formal slaughter of all animals in the Muslim and Jewish faiths to produce halal meat. Otherwise in written religions one has recourse not to sacrifice, anyhow to blood offering, but to the oral mode, to more or less precise formulae in the form of largely written prayer, the offering of words. At the same time concrete offerings to the gods were rejected. Because the Near Eastern religions were monotheistic, the focus was the High God who, having created everything, had no need of any offering (and in any case He was part of the 'spiritual' realm rather than the 'material'). But the written religions had periodic festivals, of a religious inspiration, which required fasting as well as feasting, often tied to phases of the life of the prophet, of Jesus, of Mahomet or of Moses. In the fasts the congregation went short of particular foods, in the feasts they stuffed themselves with special ones, with Christmas puddings, Easter cakes, delicacies that in Europe were filled with dried fruits and spices, foreign produce from exotic lands. Both fast and feast set the occasion aside as distinct from the every day of ordinary consumption. At the same time, some societies (in Eurasia, not Africa) were stratified in terms of types of food recipes and service. This culinary stratification had religious implications, especially because in such societies religions were often against stratification. 'It is easier for a camel to pass through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven'. So it was in other religions, not of China (in Mencius) but in Islam. According to the great Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldūn, this had an ecological aspect:

"It should be known that the influence of abundance upon the body is apparent even in matters of religion and divine worship. The frugal inhabitants of the desert and those of settled areas who have accustomed themselves to hunger and to abstinence from pleasures are found to be more religious and more ready for divine worship than people who live in luxury and abundance. Indeed, it can be observed that there are few religious people in towns and cities, in as much as people there are for the most part obstinate and careless, which is connected with the use of much meat, seasonings, and fine wheat".

He went on: "The existence of pious men and ascetics is, therefore, restricted to the desert, whose inhabitants eat frugally" (1969: 67). Holy men are not prone to 'luxury and abundance'; fat clerics are figures of fun, not to be taken seriously; to achieve communication with God it is often necessary to

fast, to give up 'luxury and abundance', an aspect of the religious life that marks all the world's literate religions. That differs from the practice in oral religions that characterized pre-Bronze Age societies. It is obvious that the animal sacrifice of which I have spoken occurs only in Neolithic societies where you have domestication of grain and animals. Hunting and gathering societies have to have other, more abstract ways of communicating with their gods, visions and trances in North America, tribal gatherings in Australia such as the Corroborees of which Durkheim wrote and which he saw as the very origins of the religious life. But food only became a significant element in religion with the domestication of the relevant plants or animals. The Bronze Age underwent a revolution in rural production, with great consequences for urban living. The advent of the plough drawn by animal traction, as well as irrigated land, increased the yields per man, and in the latter case the yields per acre, enormously. Some were able to benefit, others not. Stratification, which had been strictly limited in the preceding Neolithic, now became widespread, with the result that the rich developed a very different culture from the poor, including of food. With the Bronze Age you get the emergence of literate religions, with their prophets and their creeds, together with the sort of differentiation that Ibn Khaldun found between the town and the desert. Too much consumption, not enough religion. Written religion is often involved in giving to poorer members of this differentiated community, of giving the Friday sadaqqa, of helping widows and orphans, of aiding other members of the religion. Charity, caritas, is an intrinsic part of these differentiated religions, and that includes primarily the task of feeding others here on earth rather than in heaven. In some stratified societies, parallel to the differentiation of food and cuisine along class lines, the gods have their own special diet, for example, ambrosia in the case of the Greek gods. More usually when they do not enjoy the fruits of offerings, of sacrifice, they are concerned on a more spiritual level as being nourished by the word, by prayer. In Freudian terms religion began with a meal since the Oedipus Complex, which represented the beginning of social organization, including religion (see Totem and Taboo) and not simply killing the father but eating his body. I do not want to discourse on cannibalism but it is worth asking why we (and not other animals) restrain themselves by not eating human flesh. The renunciation of food is as important in religion (and in life generally) as its consumption, whether taboo or not. And as Audrey Richards insisted in *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* food appears to anthropologists to be equally basic to humanity as the renunciation of sex. The renunciation of food in simple societies is widespread, especially in the form of 'totemism', of the prohibition on eating the animal or food (there are other forms of prohibition) that is associated with the clan or shrine, a prohibition which does not 'cost' a lot in nutritional terms, since the food does not form a large part of the diet. But that is not always the case. I knew a man among the LoDagaa who drank no beer, a great deprivation there since beer accompanied every festival and was for many an essential part of the diet – fresh beer contains much of the goodness of the grain from which it is made. But the Kontome, the 'fairies', the beings of the wild, had told him to renounce beer because of some misfortune he had suffered. And so he did. This was an individual renunciation. But groups too have norms about renouncing foods which others see as important. We only have to look at the practice of vegetarians in Europe and of course their counterparts among the Brahmin of India. I have seen a Jain housewife spend hours sorting through rice in case any weevils were there, since that group too is vegetarian and would eat rice but avoid the weevil. Indeed they also avoid any vegetable, such as onion, that has an obvious root, since in pulling this, from the ground, you 'kill' the vegetable. That same idea occurs in the work of James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* about the killing of the Corn Spirit that is involved in every harvest when a sickle or a scythe is used to 'kill' the grain. Mention of the Corn Spirit brings us to the Neolithic where mankind is involved in slaughtering for food the very plants or animals that he or she has raised, has given life. That 'killing' does not involve actual renunciation of the food but it does involve a wariness about its consumption, a preliminary sacrifice to the Corn Spirit but obviously the slaughter of animals in a formal way, in sacrifice, the halal butchering of the Muslim or Jew. In Christianity, who eat all of God's creation, the killing of the animal is dealt with sympathetically, the killing of lamb, for instance (born at Easter), which may represent the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In Judaism we obviously think of Abraham killing the ram (in sacrifice to the High God) instead of his son, Isaac. In Islam, you have the killing (but not I think sacrifice) of a sheep at the Id. The taking of life for food, including for some the life of plants, is a delicate offering, bringing out ambivalence to the shedding of blood, the cessation of life, and that requires a religious response to deal with, a calling in of supernatural powers to the table or hearth. Indeed, reverting to the differences in some written religions, we should perhaps see the sacralising of food, as in the Grace which used to be said at all Christian meals, as not simply a question of thanking God for the meal but as excusing us, the partakers, from having denied life in order to maintain it. The Grace has disappeared from most of our familial tables, except perhaps for religious

feasts. But it is well worth remembering that until quite recently every major meal was sacralised by a Grace, and until lately in my college in Cambridge every evening meal is preceded by the college Grace. What difference this trend towards secularization often has made to us would be difficult to say, but clearly the free play of scientific thought has played its part in this process. We no longer need the blessing of the Gods in what we consume. Ridding food of its connection with religion is part of this process.