Savoring the Sacred: Understanding Religion through Food

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"I began to follow the scent, like a child drawn to a candy store." That's how April Nelson described the beginning of her research. Along with an amazing voice that she is training as a music major, April has a keen sense of smell, which helped her find her intended destination in a Charlotte strip mall one blustery January afternoon. She was on the trail of food stores catering to Muslims. The scent she described was the sweet-sharp aroma of spices. Once inside A.J. Indo-Pak Grocery, April approached Jagtar Singh. Although she had prepared a number of questions ahead of time, her nose got the best of her. "What's that smell?" came out of her mouth first. She got a smile and an education in return.

April could have learned about Islam without a trip to Charlotte, a little over an hour's drive from Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. In fact, she had already listened to me drone on about it in class. But April and her classmates really learned about Islam and other traditions through experiences such as her encounter with Jagtar and his spices. She got a vivid sense of the richness of Islam that a lecture could not impart.

Approximately seventy-five Converse students over the past year have learned to see, smell, touch, and taste how humans in a variety of religious contexts find meaning through food. Some, like April, did so as researchers with the Harvard Pluralism Project. Converse students have been documenting new immigrant religious traditions in the Charlotte area as part of the nationwide project. We chose to focus particularly on

foodways. Other students participated in an interdisciplinary course entitled, “Gender, Food, and Meaning,” part of Converse’s Honors Program. Along with consuming hefty portions of theory, sacred texts, and literary homages to food, they have eaten in Hindu Temples and Jewish homes, and learned to cook exotic dishes and perform the Zen Tea ceremony. Still others were guests at class feasts, or contributed to a research project on food and college women. And some just went along for the ride and a break from the Dining Hall.

I have been host, chief cook, and potwasher for this progressive meal. M.F.K. Fisher once remarked that she wrote about food because she was “hungry.” Most of us are, for one thing or another. My students, who come largely from evangelical Protestant backgrounds, know this. What I hope to do as a religious studies professor is to heighten their awareness of it, to train their palates in a sense. I want help them understand how the rumblings of stomachs and hearts might be related. I want to help them get a taste for the depths of flavor that religions across time and cultures express. I want them to be aware of the bountiful variety of religious expression that exists in the United States today. And, I hope that through getting a taste for the food that feeds the hunger of others, they might come to appreciate how it can be hearty sustenance just as their own traditional fare is for them.

April began with the smell of spice. The color of green tea, the sound of falafel frying, and the feel of dough drew in others. Through food, all the students took in (literally!) things about religion that are difficult to get across in the abstractions of the classroom. What follows is a taste of what they savored….

Religion is more than belief. April, who comes from a Bible-centered tradition, was very impressed when Jagtar showed her the sources of Islamic beliefs about food in the Koran. But she soon learned that Islam, like her form of Christianity a tradition suspicious of empty forms and rites, means submission to Allah through practice as well as belief. Many of the spices she smelled are used to season the *halal* (permitted) meats carried by Jagtar's store. Muslims, like Jews, follow strict butchering practices that reinforce the links between cleanliness, holiness, and healthiness. "You can see the difference," Jagtar told April. "There is no blood in our meat. Blood is sacred; we do not consume it." The next time April visited her neighborhood market, she took a look in the meat department and observed, "I never noticed how much blood our meat has in it before." She learned one of the key aspects of many religions: holiness is "wholeness" of life. How and what one eats can be just as important as how one thinks.

Religion is experienced in the body. In an act of solidarity with the Muslim community she was researching, Heather Barclay decided to keep the Ramadan fast, which means not eating from sunrise to sunset during this holy month. Heather, a superb student with extraordinary energy, found this ultimately too challenging. "I was exhausted from rising so early to take my only meal of the day. I was dying for something to eat by lunchtime. Not being able to drink was really tough. I couldn't understand how Muslims go about their regular activities." Heather decided to investigate further. She interviewed Seema Azad, a twenty-year resident of Charlotte from Pakistan, who explained how Muslim children gradually learn to fast. "They are not forced," she said, "but they come to want to do it because we all do. It becomes second nature and our bodies learn to handle it." As

she and Heather talked one afternoon in the middle of Ramadan, a delicious stew simmered away on Seema's stove. This would be her family's fast-breaking meal after prayers at sundown. "The aroma was overwhelming, and I just had to ask how she could stand to cook and fast at the same time," Heather recalled. "The only thing that bothers me," Seema told her, "is that I can't taste the food as I cook. But that also reminds me of the significance of Ramadan. It's the time I can't fuss over the stew all afternoon. I just have to let it go and concentrate on God. The smell reminds me."

Symbol, ritual, and myth are the vehicles of religious experience. A first-year student named Liz faced a personal dilemma on her first research visit to a Hindu temple. During the ceremony she was observing, fruit was offered by worshippers to the deities. Feeding the gods is a central act of Hindu devotion. The gods, Hindus believe, accept and sanctify the food. Devotees then eat the sacred leftovers or *prasadam*. When Liz, a born-again Christian, was offered a banana used in the ritual by an elderly Hindu woman, she wondered, "Would eating it be betraying Christ?"

While coming from a religion that sees its own sacred meal purely as a memorial symbol, Liz still intuited something about food's ability to transmit the holy. In religious studies, we say that symbols point beyond themselves to transcendent reality. A Hindu student explained to Liz how the images of deities point to something that cannot be fully expressed by any image. Lovely statues and bananas are part of the language through which humans communicate with the divine through sacred stories (myths) and actions (rituals).

The power of symbol, myth, and ritual is often difficult to get across to Protestant students, who have come to understand approaching the divine as the unmediated right of individuals anytime, anywhere. Symbolic food can be a particularly vivid eye-opener for students encountering unfamiliar traditions. Why didn't her participation in other aspects of Hindu worship, such as handclapping to the rhythm of the hymns, bother Liz? It took a banana she understood to be more than a banana to do that.

From the forbidden fruit of Eden to the world cooked into existence by Brahmin, food myths are ubiquitous but vary widely. Even within traditions, individual experience of ritual is both different from and the same as every other experience of it. This dynamic makes religion live for the devotee. She experiences it with a long line of ancestors and in her own body. As students watched members of the Cambodian Buddhist Temple place rice offerings in their monks' begging bowls, the connections between past and present, ancestors and the living, the transcendent and the fleeting, came home to them. Southeast Asian Buddhists feed their monks to gain spiritual merit for themselves and their ancestors. As Tina Ya, a medical administrator and cultural mediator for the Cambodian community explained, "When I put rice in the monk's bowl, I think about my mother. It brings her honor."

Students noticed that the monks' bowls were made of plastic. This is an ancient ritual adapted to modern convenience. Most of the traditional Cambodian fare was prepared by older women. Students giggled, however, as they noticed a younger Cambodians place a Burger King bag on the rice table. As the students, at first timidly but soon with gusto, feasted with the community, one remarked, "I wonder if this will survive here? I mean, the younger people aren't cooking. They eat fast food like us."

Religion involves community. Everywhere students went, they encountered similar issues. They learned that food is a major way of re-establishing community in a new place. When students first visited the Charlotte Jain community, they didn't expect food to be a significant factor. Jains are strict vegetarians, who avoid any eating that involves killing plants or animals. What students discovered, however, is the importance of the monthly meals shared by the Jains. Families take turns hosting the meals, with obvious pride in the beautiful array of dishes. "It is difficult to eat outside our homes because of our diet," Mr. Doshi explained. "Here, we eat in community; we are not alone."

Ashante Thompson discovered that another Hindu community was ensuring its survival by having a monthly meal cooked by its youth. Adults taught the teenagers how to make traditional Indian foods associated with special religious occasions. A Jain mother told Victoria Smith that she had taught her three sons, now grown professional men, to cook traditional dishes, "so they will remember."

Religion isn't always in church. To investigate religion and food, students had to get out of halls of worship. In kitchens and dining rooms, students saw facets of religion that they would have missed otherwise. They remarked repeatedly on how eating made homes sacred spaces. One student observed as she returned from Sabbath dinner with a Jewish family, "That was a dinner and a worship service at the same time."

Women are powerful religious agents. Typically, students visiting a community would be approached by male leaders who would show them around and tell them about the

religion in terms they thought the students could understand; in other words, what they believe. Women's participation, and other significant aspects, might go unnoticed. One of the reasons we examined food is because Converse is a women's college; we wanted a focus that would help us get to know women.

Students learned that women are often the religious experts when it comes to ritual foodways. While April was impressed with Jagtar's knowledge of the Koran, she found it amusing that he "didn't know a thing" about how to make the holiday foods he loved. "That's typical," she remarked to the class, as others nodded. The next day, April got an email from Jagtar. He had consulted several female relatives and sent recipes they had given him.

Students also learned of the complexities that food creates for women in religious communities. Young professional women do not have the time to make the dishes their mothers once prepared. Some resent the pressure to keep up labor-intensive traditions, but feel guilty if they don't. Others compromise by devising shortcuts or sharing "women's" tasks with their spouses. Seema reflected on this: "I'd like to write down some recipes for our daughters. But we must start with simple things. Biryani, for example, our rice dish, is too complicated and takes too long. They would get discouraged."

Religion plus food can be a recipe for common ground. "I finally decided that Jesus would want me to be polite, so I took it." That's how Liz resolved her dilemma with the banana. She decided that sharing the food of another faith might be the best way to live out her faith.

Encountering religious diversity often raises difficult questions for students like Liz, who belong to traditions that teach other religions are false paths. Her southern Christianity, however, also taught her the importance of hospitality and politeness. Liz and other students were awed by the generosity shown them in the communities they visited. They were treated as special guests in houses of worship and invited for meals in homes. Many of the people they encountered come from cultures in which the savoring of fellowship over food has not become a lost art. Meals gave them time to get to know people. As they were fed by others and ate with them, they became connected to them.

In her journal, Quinn described her initial encounter with the neo-pagan group she was researching:

> At first I felt very uncomfortable. People continued arriving, and everyone was carrying some type of food. The priestess said that food is a large part of their community. It is a way they get together to have fellowship with one another. I know that my family never gets together unless there is food involved. As I watched everyone interact, I noticed how much they reminded me of a family. We all use food to bring us together in fellowship. When they offered me something to drink, it was sweet. After that, I was fine.

Food also serves as a way to relate when difference can't be overcome. Heather's favorite memory is of being taught to make chapati by Hindu grandmothers. "They couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Hindi, but we communicated with our hands as they taught me to roll the dough. I learned that this is how they taught little girls in India. I could tell they enjoyed it; it reminded them of happy times. It reminded me of learning from my grandmother."

In many ways, students tasted the connections between the foreign and the familiar. As part of our research, I asked students to investigate the foodways of their own religious communities. Anna came to see her church's potlucks as food rituals. "We

always have a lot of potato dishes," she related. "I just took this for granted until I read our church cookbook. It seems that many years ago, the church had a supper and everyone brought potatoes. Now it's a tradition, going back to that time."

As students came to know religions new to them through food, they began to experience their own traditions anew. One student commented, "I understand more about the Lord's Supper now that I know how important food is in other religions." Some students even learned to cook their own traditions' dishes. Understanding religion through food helped students appreciate difference; but it also helped them become aware of how much all of us hungry people share. April concluded her report, "The next time I was in my grocery store, I caught a whiff of something familiar. I smiled. It was that smell again. I'd just never noticed it before."