

Prairie Unitarian-Universalist Society

November 9, 1997

“Culinary Rituals”

1. Prelude - the Ethnic Connection
2. Welcome - Barb Park
3. Chalice Lighting: Warren for Moses
4. Hymn: #406 UUA Hymnal, “Let Us Break Bread Together”
5. Joys and Sorrows (Barb Park)
6. Bulbes, a Song About Potatoes - the Ethnic Connection
7. It is somewhat paradoxical that in the two areas of our lives where we are most animal, eating and sex, we human beings should also be especially social and influenced by culture. We interact with others in complex way, and our actions are circumscribed by rituals. Here, for example, is how people ask for food in Minnesota. Barbara and I come from Minnesota, and we can testify that people really behave this way.
Two food rituals from Howard Mohr, **How to Talk Minnesotan**, pp. 18-20
—Barbara Rames, Reid Miller, Warren Hagstrom
8. The ways in which we prepare food are also deeply affected by culture. Or, perhaps it would be better to say, following the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, that in cooking we transform nature into culture. Levi-Strauss argued that there is a structure to the ways we prepare food and the ways we think about food. These structures must have more or less fixed elements. Levi-Strauss argued that in thinking about food we tend to think in terms of binary opposites. To some extent these elements vary among cultures, just as the elements of spoken languages do. But, since we all live in much the same nature, there are some common elements.

All cultures categorize foods as raw, cooked, or rotten (that is, fermented, as in cheese, pickles, and wine). [Here use tripod and felt tipped pen.]

Rotten

Raw

Cooked

(3 binary opposites here)

In France, there is also a binary opposition between sweet and sour, although this opposition is absent in Chinese and German cooking.

So consider the structure of a typical American meal:

Salad (raw, with dressing, rotten)

Soup (cooked) (not sweet)

Meat, cooked vegetable, potatoes (cooked)(not sweet)

Accompanied by leavened bread (rotten and cooked)

Dessert (sweet)

The whole accompanied by a beverage or beverages (water, coffee, milk, wine, etc.)

[There isn't any special physiological need to have tea or coffee with meals. For years I wondered why Chinese, Japanese, and Korean restaurants were so indifferent about the teas they used.....in Korean restaurants you might be served some awful stuff made from potato peels. It turns out that Asians take their tea seriously. It is consumed in highly ritualized tea ceremonies, often closely linked to religion, and it isn't usually served at meals.]

9. Let me now turn to a more interesting and important example, the Jewish dietary laws spelled out in the books of Moses, in particular Leviticus. Judaism, among the great world religions, lays particularly great emphasis on ritual, on knowing the ritual laws and conforming to them. It tends to place correspondingly less emphasis upon matters of belief and conformity to creeds. I think one can find Jews who continue to conform to many of the laws while not accepting any of the cognitive claims of the Bible, perhaps while not even believing in God.

Jews are also more likely than others to think of ritual objects in terms of binary opposites, things that must be kept apart.

It's hard to make sense of the dietary laws in the Books of Moses. People have tried to do so for thousands of years. It might be futile. Back in the 12th century, Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher of the middle ages, wrote that "Those who trouble themselves to find a cause for any of these detailed rules are in my eyes devoid of sense..." (Mary Douglas, **Purity and Danger**, p. 44). That hasn't stopped people from trying, and the literature is large. There are so many articles, in fact, that the **Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature** has a special topic heading for the Jewish dietary laws, and usually there is a title or more listed under the topic.

Note, by the way, that my discussion will have next to nothing to do with how the food actually tastes. The Jews were widely scattered in the diaspora, and food prepared according to the dietary laws could vary enormously. Claudia Rosen, in **The Book of Jewish Food**, was led to ask if there actually is such a thing as Jewish cooking. She concludes that there is. In some limited cases the dietary laws did have an effect on flavors. Thus, the rule against mixing meat and milk products led to a more extensive use of chicken fat rather than butter.

[10. A common explanation of the laws can be dismissed easily. That can be called the Positivistic explanation, that the laws are bad or not so bad science, in particular nutritional science. Thus, a taboo on eating pork means that people won't contract parasitic diseases such as trichinosis, not cooking meat and milk together makes it less likely to consume spoiled food, etc. Although there might be cases where the Jewish dietary laws might make some nutritional sense, I

think this general approach is patent nonsense. First, there is no evidence that the eating habits of the Jews were any more nutritional than those of neighboring peoples with different food customs. The Chinese rarely had taboos against pork, but it seems not to have limited their population growth. Second, the approach doesn't enable us to understand why people continue to obey the rules today, when we have a better positive nutritional science. Third, the theory is not in accord with the Bible, which never gives nutritional arguments for the dietary laws. And, finally, the positivist theory cannot account for the social functions of the dietary laws nor the structure that exists among them.]

11. Ritual is like language, it gives people *things* to think with. My source, another French anthropologist, put it this way:

“Why...did [the Jews] strictly condemn some food items and not others? The answer must not be sought in the nature of the food item, any more than the sense of a word can be sought in the word itself....A social sign - in this case a dietary prohibition - cannot be understood in isolation. It must be placed into the context of the signs in the same area of life, together with which it constitutes a system....” (p. 129)

The system contains the following binary opposites (use chart):

-1- Plant food vs. meat. Meat presents a problem, since one of the greatest sins is killing, and you can't eat meat without killing. The garden of Eden was vegetarian, and so is paradise.

-2- Among meats, there is a clear, but very complex, opposition of
clean vs unclean

Blood is taboo for people, since it must be offered to God — the offering in a kosher slaughter house atones for the killing of the animal. The meat of carnivores is unclean, since they must kill to live. Thus one is restricted to the meat of animals with hooved feet, cloven hoofs, and animals that chew cuds, as opposed to horses. (Camels are also taboo, but I don't know if they chew cuds.)

There is also a rule against mixing milk with meat: “You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Maybe this is an extension of incest taboos to the animals we eat.

-3- For both plant food and meat, there is a clear opposition between
blemished food vs unblemished food

Especially for sacrificial purposes, food must be unblemished.

And for religious purposes in general, there is a preference for unfermented food, such as unleavened bread on the major religious occasions.

-4- Given the stress on clear binary opposites, food that cannot be clearly categorized tends to be taboo. There is an opposition between

pure models vs. mixed models

Food from the sea that does not swim or has no scales is taboo, such as shellfish or dolphins.

Birds that do not fly are taboo, such as ostriches. (I don't suppose that the ancient Jews had experiences with penguins, but I suppose the later rabbis interpreted the rules to make penguin meat taboo.) And animals without legs, the snakes, are taboo.

-4- Food can become blemished in the fermentation process , so we have the opposition between

rotten vs. cooked or raw, and rotten food is avoided in offerings.

For religious purposes, unfermented food is typically preferred, such as unleavened bread on major religious occasions.

-5- Given the stress on clear binary opposites, food that cannot be clearly categorized tends to be taboo. There is an opposition between

pure models vs. mixed models

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12. Similar structured patterns are found in the non-dietary laws of Moses. Thus, we are told that "You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together," you should not mix wool and linen in the same garment, and so forth.

And, especially, there is a prohibition of mixed marriages among people, between Hebrews and foreigners.

These rules restricted intimate social interaction between the Jews and neighboring people, and the Jews almost always lived in societies where they were among non-Jews, from Abraham to the present. The restrictions helped preserve the identity of the Jews

[The ancient Jews were patriarchal and polygynous. Powerful men would be tempted to select women from other groups as wives and concubines. The rules inhibited such tendencies. So also did the paradoxical rule that one inherits one's identity as a Jew from one's mother and not one's father....]

13. Christianity originated in Judaism. Even as an entirely Jewish sect it was quite unorthodox. Orthodox Jews could not accept the idea of the deity of Christ. "A man is a man, or he is a God. He cannot be both at the same time....A God-man, or a God become man, was bound to offend their logic. Christ is the absolute hybrid."

But the Christian abandonment of the Jewish dietary laws was a major part of their rupture with Judaism. This is found already in the Gospels: Jesus said, "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth," (Matt. 15:11), and Mark reported, "Thus he declared all foods clean" (7:19).

It is found elsewhere as well. Blood, for instance, is consumed in the Mass in the form of its signifier: 'the blood of the grape.'

Food clearly remained important in Christian myths and rituals, and many of the Christian practices were adapted from Judaism. But the changes in the Christian model made them far

more acceptable to the Greeks and the Romans, who were, among other things, quite ready to accept god-man hybrids.

14. Discussion

[Maybe note that in cities like NYC, Jews are often patrons of Chinese restaurants, where they can consume pork. I guess it's called 'safe tref,' tref being the word for normally taboo food. Perhaps this is because Chinese food is equally alien to both Christian and Jewish culture. It's less dangerous than something like Italian food.]

15. Let's close this part of the program by singing a hymn about a Unitarian-Universalist ritual, "Coffee, Coffee, Coffee," #101 in the Prairie Song Book.

I put this on the program with some apologies, since I know that at least two members hate the song. One of them is Doleta, who sang "Holy, Holy, Holy" as a child and thinks this pokes fun at that nice old hymn. She also thinks it might be offensive to visitors. I think I persuaded her to let me put it on the program this morning because it fits in. The Jews have been a cosmopolitan people, perhaps the most cosmopolitan. But we're cosmopolitan too, perhaps nowhere more than in our cuisine. We can appropriate the cuisine of other peoples while respecting their integrity. Perhaps this can be true for religious music as well. We can appropriate hymns like "Holy, Holy, Holy," while respecting their original integrity. Perhaps. Just as the early Christians tinkered with Jewish rituals, we have done so more recently. We aren't entirely free of rituals ourselves.

But maybe I'm mistaken.....Any comments on the song?

16. Offering

17. Introduction of guests and visitors

18. Prairie announcements

19. Closing words: "Revel with Bacchus, or eat a dry crust with Jesus, but never sit down without one of the gods." ----D. H. Lawrence.

Sources:

Jean Soler, "The Semiotics of Food in the Bible," pp. 126-138 in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, eds., **Food and Drink in History** (1979) TX 353 F59

Mary Douglas, **Purity and Danger** (1966). especially the essay, "The abominations of Leviticus" GN 494 D6

~~H~~oward Mohr, **How to Talk Minnesotan** (Penguin 1987)

~~C~~laudia Roden, **The Book of Jewish Food** (Knopf 1996)

Discovered the day after the service at Borders:

Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik, eds., **Food and Culture: A Reader** (Routledge, 1997)