1

Introduction

For John Chrysostom, the most important meal in the daily life of his Christian congregation is not the Eucharist, but rather the ordinary domestic supper. As a priest in the wealthy metropolis of Antioch, John regards the dining room as the most dangerous part of the house because of its similarities to the theater, which he famously abhors as a cause of urban vice. He proposes an alternative script for Christian dining: instead of theatrical songs and raillery, psalm-singing and Scripture-reading; instead of elaborate sauces and marble paneling, simple fare and repentance; instead of envy and social climbing, true friendship and inclusion of the poor.[1] Through such exchanges the Christian can transform the domestic banquet from a display of vice into a training ground for virtue, and convert the household into a little church.

Shenoute of Atripe, abbot of the White Monastery Federation in middle Egypt, explains to a lay audience that they could become food for Jesus:

There are plants that human beings, especially the poor people, consider good to eat and there are others that are very bad to eat because they are wild and extremely harmful. So too the sinners who repent are considered very good by the mercies of God, and they are acceptable to the one who became poor for our sake, Jesus. And all those who do not repent are unacceptable to him.[2]

Shenoute spins out this analogy into a lengthy catalog of botanical virtues and vices, mapping features of plants, like thorns and rough bark or fruit

---

[1] John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Gen.* 7, PG 54.616; *Hom. in Col.* 1, PG 62.304–305.
[2] Shenoute, *You, O Lord* 5, GL 180, trans. David Brakke, unpublished.

without any stone or rind, onto personal qualities like quarrelsomeness or charity. He explains to his audience that ascetic labor is as natural, necessary, and transformative as digging irrigation ditches, pruning trees, grinding wheat, and fermenting wine. Even more striking, he identifies repentant sinners with food that Jesus, as a poor person, finds acceptable to eat, an unusual inversion of the Eucharistic relationship with potent socioeconomic overtones.

Paulinus of Nola, aristocratic "impresario" of the Campanian cult of St. Felix, produces annual poems for performance at the saint's festival, mingling praise and didacticism for the benefit of the visiting crowds.[3] He regards poetic production as a sacrificial offering, all the more valuable because it is the product of his inner self. Sacrifice takes many forms, but in 406 Paulinus describes the poem as a "promised feast … the meal which must be modestly digested by your eager ears."[4] The meal of the poem, moreover, is inspired by another meal; this poem tells a three-fold story of farmers who vow sacrificial animals to Felix. After some mishaps and miracles (including a flying pig), they slaughter the animals on site and feed the meat to the local poor. The eating mouths of the poor and the speaking mouth of the poet are united by this real-and-figurative sacrifice.

From Roman Syria to Egypt to Italy, therefore, the discourse of food shapes the emerging norms of Christian piety in ways both obvious and subtle. Beyond the Eucharist or ascetic fasting, the entirety of late antique food culture turns out to be a venue for Christian discourse on what it means to live a genuinely Christian life. Its semiotic richness depends on the overlapping metaphors and multivalent resonance of food across contexts, places, and occasions real-and-imagined (to borrow Edward Soja's term from *Thirdspace*). This discourse is not merely a trickle-down or oppositional model of lay versus monastic or institutional piety. Rather, food helps early Christians negotiate among ideas across the spectrum of lived experience. Public and private, lay and monastic, domestic and institutional – seen through the prism of food rhetoric and practice, these dichotomies shift and reform into a map of everyday religion that is constantly under negotiation.

---

[3] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63.
[4] Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 20, *The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola*, trans. P. G. Walsh. *Ancient Christian Writers* no. 40 (New York: Newman Press, 1975).

1.1 CHRISTIANS AND FOOD IN THE GRECO-ROMAN MEDITERRANEAN

The reach and scope of this discourse is possible because Christians across the late Roman world participated in a shared food culture touching every aspect of life from biological to social to symbolic. Greco-Roman food culture emerged from the immense ecological diversity of the Mediterranean with near-infinite local variations on a common theme.[5] The "Mediterranean triad" of grain, grape, and olive drove the agricultural economy and provided staple foods as well as cultural stereotypes. Barbarians, to the Greeks and Romans, were not just people who spoke a language other than Greek or Latin. They were also the people who drank beer and used butter, who didn't cook their meat, or who ate on horseback.[6]

Food is a vehicle of social differentiation, experiment, and controversy. Even more than *what* you eat, the key to your social and political identity lies in how, where, and with whom you eat. Greeks thought of the symposium as one of the defining institutions of the *polis*, where elite youths were acculturated into the norms of their social and political class.[7] Cicero remarked that the Romans improved on the Greek custom by calling their shared meal *convivium* – literally "living together."[8] But shared meals, for elite Romans, were more than celebrations of unity and friendship. They were also occasions to display one's status and to negotiate the hierarchical relationships among friends, family, patrons, and clients that structured all social networks.[9] In a world of dramatic wealth inequality and elite politics, conspicuous consumption of food both created political capital and attracted moral controversy.[10] The production and distribution of food reveal class and gender distinctions,

---

[5] Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2000).

[6] Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62–72.

[7] Eva Stehle, *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece: Nondramatic Poetry in Its Setting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 213–227; Pauline Schmitt-Pantel "Sacrificial Meal and Symposion: Two Models of Civic Institutions in the Archaic City?" in *Sympotica: A Symposium on the Symposion,* ed. Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 14–33.

[8] Cicero, *Ad Familiares* 9.24.3.

[9] John D'Arms, "The Roman Convivium and the Idea of Equality," in *Sympotica: A Symposium on the Symposion*, ed. Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 308–320.

[10] John D'Arms, "Performing Culture: Roman Spectacle and the Banquets of the Powerful," *Studies in the History of Art* 56 (1999): 300–319.

labor practices, and systems of control and commodification. Radical social statements can be made by manipulating these norms.

As a pillar of human life, food is also central to religion, to that collection of practices and theories that express a relationship between human and divine or spiritual beings. Greco-Roman religion with all its variety rests on a core system of votive offerings, gifts to the gods that appease their wrath, establish relationships of exchange and obligation, or allow human beings to share a meal with them.[11] Indeed, the sacrificial meal is just as important as the ritual slaughter in expressing the respective identities and the relationships at play.[12] In the cuisine of sacrifice, meat and wine, bread and oil, fruit and cheese become heavily laden with meaning. Consumption of sacred food is an even more transformative activity than consumption of regular food.[13] In essence, every function that food serves in the ordinary social world, it serves in heightened form in the religious world.

Food, therefore, communicates across religious and social boundaries, and unites personal identity with communal experience. The food laws of ancient Judaism, for example, may be unusual in their particulars, but their function is fully comprehensible in this world as a marker of special religious identity, based on a unique relationship with a single God.[14] Some early Christians make much of their freedom from the laws of kashrut, but they too develop a religious idiom based on food as a language that communicates their special relationship with God.[15] Of course the core ritual of Christianity is the Eucharist, which developed over three centuries from a shared meal with ritual elements into a fully ritualized act of sacrificial commemoration through the offering and

[11] Nicole Belayche, "Religious Actors in Daily Life: Practice and Related Beliefs," in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 275–291. John Scheid, "Sacrifices for Gods and Ancestors" in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 263–271.
[12] Meredith J. C. Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).
[13] Meredith J. C. Warren, "Tastes from Beyond: Persephone's Pomegranate and Otherworldly Consumption in Antiquity," in *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Kelli C. Rudolph (London: Routledge, 2018), 104–119.
[14] Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). Jordan Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[15] Of course, the earliest followers of Jesus continued to practice Jewish law, as did later Christian communities who maintained a closer connection to Judaism (so-called Jewish-Christians).

consumption of bread and wine.[16] Foundational work on the Eucharist as a Christian meal has emphasized its creative dependence on classical meal models,[17] its early diversity of form and content,[18] and the social effects of its original location within an "ordinary" meal.[19]

I contend that creative Christian negotiation of traditional food culture does not come to an end with the ritualization of the Eucharist. In fact, I suspect that it merely shifts in emphasis to more diffuse forms of social and religious practice, through which Christians navigate the performance of their religious commitments in daily life. The primary expectations of lay Christians – listening to Scripture and (perhaps) participating in the Eucharist at church, charitable giving and a moral lifestyle at home – are all at various times expressed through food. Scripture and Christian preaching are a feast for the soul. Sharing your own meal with the poor is the highest form of charity. Gluttony is the root of all sins of excess. Virtue is a fruit, a sacrifice, a state of health.

Through these metaphors and practices, food culture shapes the whole process by which 4th and 5th century Christians develop and theorize a uniquely Christian piety. Several broad religious and cultural trends of late antiquity lie behind this discourse. First, Christian leaders are eager to distinguish between Christians and others, between the "right" and "wrong" kinds of Christians. Meal practices of all kinds are key to this boundary maintenance. Second, in the wake of Constantine's imperial legitimization of Christianity, there seems to be a desire to establish Christianity as socially normative, which is aided by appeals to the naturalizing tendency of established food culture. Finally, the radical ascetic movement raises the stakes for defining Christian piety in the lives of ordinary people, creating an arena where hierarchies of personal commitment are negotiated in terms of basic human activities like eating and sex.

[16] Gerard Rouwhorst, "Sacrifice in Early Christianity: The Social Dimensions of a Metaphor," in *Sacrifice in Modernity: Community, Ritual, Identity*, ed. Joachim Duyndam, Anne-Marie Korte, and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 132–146.

[17] Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

[18] Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[19] Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009); Dennis E. Smith and Hal Taussig, eds., *Meals in the Early Christian World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

What I am calling "piety" is the hybrid of social practices, ethical theory, and religion that emerges from this continuing Christian negotiation of food culture and religious identity. Elite Christian cultural producers use the conceptual frameworks of existing Roman religion and society to theorize Christian identity from the ground up.[20] Sometimes they offer new theological explanations for activities that people already practice, such as votive offerings and meals at martyr shrines. Sometimes they argue in favor of new practices as an extension of accepted cultural norms, such as monastic meal regimen or Christianized rules for social dining. In both cases, they appeal to common concepts of food both to communicate ascetic theory and moral theology and to monitor the boundaries of Christian identity among lay congregations.

But totalizing institutional strategies of identity formation and boundary maintenance vis-a-vis outsiders do not tell the whole story either. Christian identity in the 4th century is increasingly marked by social differentiation *within* the Christian community, particularly in the perceived hierarchies of lay and ascetic levels of commitment.[21] Despite the high-pitched (and more exhaustively studied) debates over marriage and virginity in this period, I will demonstrate that the discourse of food provides a more nuanced view of the lived and imaginative range of Christian experience for the "ordinary" person. (Furthermore, by not focusing solely on fasting, I challenge the often negative interpretations of the effect of ascetic fasting regimens on Christian culture more widely.) The discourse of food, in fact, breaks down any rigid maintenance of internal hierarchical structures as much as, or more than, it enables them to be built in the first place.

Existing studies of Christian food culture tend to divide it into a taxonomy of meal types and contexts and to study them separately: eucharist and agape, martyr festival, ascetic dietary regimen, domestic meal customs, charitable feasts, etc. This division has the effect of obscuring the shared structures of lived experience – practical, conceptual, and imaginative – that support them all. Their individual meaning and significance comes from the accumulated weight of interconnected socioeconomic and religious traditions. I start instead with the basic conceptual

---

[20] Stanley K. Stowers, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences, and Textual Mysteries," in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, ed. Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35–57.

[21] I'm using "lay" somewhat loosely to mean Christians who are neither members of the clergy nor dedicated or "career" ascetics.

frameworks of food metaphor and the socioeconomic frameworks of food practices in 4th century Christian discourse, and treat various meal types as they emerge out of these structures.

In particular, I juxtapose metaphorical systems grounded in food and the body with the spatial environments in which meals occur. This approach reveals a remarkably interdependent relationship between the discourse of food, imaginative concepts of Christian piety, and the construction of Christian places. In other words, Christian meals create Christian people and Christian places – which in turn create Christian meals.

1.2 FOOD THEORIES AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS

As a heuristic device for understanding ancient culture, food is everywhere and yet strangely elusive. Ancient authors seldom provide the kind of data or reflection that a modern anthropologist would like. On the other hand, they make frequent use of metaphorical, clichéd, or offhand references to food in the course of talking about something else. Food language in such sources often falls into the category of cultural commonsense wisdom that Clifford Geertz identified as "shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, *obiter dicta*, jokes, anecdotes … not in formal doctrines, axiomized theories, or architectonic dogmas."[22] Peter Brown, applying this model to his study of wealth in late antiquity, noted that the Roman discourse of wealth is a useful diagnostic tool because it falls into this category.[23] I propose that the late antique discourse of food has the same function; hence where it is most casual and most ordinary, it becomes the most powerful conveyer of cultural values. In Brown's words, the "mute certainty of commonsense judgments" comes not from the "fine-spun and closely argued opinions of an intellectual elite. Rather they claim to speak with the heavy voice of an imagined minority of right-thinking persons."[24]

---

[22] Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York; Basic Books, 1983), 90.
[23] Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 54–57.
[24] Ibid., 55.

Andrew McGowan explains the challenges and opportunities inherent in this kind of gastronomic "common sense" when it is deployed by an intellectual elite in the process of creating institutional ideology.

The force of food as a "blinding fetish," as a means of sociability sometimes too obvious to attract attention, may lie in its mediation of nature and culture. As a realm of practice in which social relations are linked to a biological base, its use as a creator and symbol of various forms of sociability is almost inevitable, but bears with it significant potential for ideological use. Since eating does involve biology, it is difficult and all the more necessary to explore the ways in which food is not really just the stuff of natural processes, as it may appear, but the stuff of society itself in various forms.[25]

To get at the ideological use and social possibilities of food discourse in early Christian communities, a combination of literary, anthropological, and material culture approaches is necessary. My analysis depends on three sets of theoretical tools from different disciplines, united by a focus on embodiment. From anthropology, I take the concept of food as "embodied material culture." From linguistics and literary theory, I draw on cognitive metaphor theory. And from cultural geography, I take the idea of space and place as socially constructed entities.

Some of the most foundational works of anthropology in the mid-20th century were the product of sustained reflection on the place of food as a cultural signifier and on its connection to religion. Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that food was akin to language as a set of communicative signs that convey the core values of a culture. He argued that a basic culinary triangle of raw–cooked–rotten could be elaborated through a given set of cultural practices and mapped onto other cultural constructs like nature and culture, male and female, human and divine.[26] Mary Douglas applied a similar lens to the food laws of ancient Israel in *Purity and Danger*. She argued that the apparently arbitrary taboos on certain animals for eating corresponds to the ideological structures of the sacrificial priesthood with its increasing degrees of personal holiness and sacred space within the temple. Forbidden animals are those that do not fit into any taxonomy, and thus represent a disorder that needs to be controlled in order to maintain the unity and purity of Israel's identity.[27] Furthermore, policing the boundaries of the individual Israelite body mirrors the maintenance of

---

[25] McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 1.
[26] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," *Partisan Review* 33, no. 4 (1966): 586–595.
[27] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966).

boundaries in the social body.[28] While her argument has been critiqued for excessive schematization (like most structuralist approaches),[29] she identifies some vital intersections between food consumption, religious ritual, bodies, communities, and sacred space. Many subsequent anthropologists have taken up this general concept that food is a language and applied it with considerable sophistication.[30]

Among the many commonplace cultural codes employed by early Christian writers, my choice to amplify food is justified by its unique material status. "Embodied material culture," a term used by more recent anthropologists, suggests that food and drink are products of material culture, with all the socioeconomic implications of commodified artifacts. But as Michael Dietler notes, food is unique among human commodities because it is "created specifically to be destroyed, but destroyed through the transformative process of ingestion into the human body. Hence, it has an unusually close relationship to the person and to both the inculcation and the symbolization of concepts of identity and difference in the construction of the self."[31] Yannis Hamilakis links changes in food technology with "technologies of the body," recognizing that food is an "expression of embodiment" connected to memory and emotion, useful for the exercise of power and resistance, and a vehicle of social change.[32]

But as Elizabeth Clark argues in *History, Theory, Text*, anthropological methods only go so far in the study of ancient history. Since much of our evidence derives from an intensely rhetorical and culturally privileged literature, literary theory is an essential tool.[33] In breaking

[28] Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 61–81.
[29] Douglas takes the idealist view that social customs arise primarily out of cultural ideology and structures of thought. Materialists like Marvin Harris, on the other side, hold that these customs (especially food customs) are the result of biological and environmental determinants. For Harris, Douglas' approach is unnecessarily complicated; he argues that the limits of the ecological niche and economic realities of pig rearing are adequate to explain its taboo status in certain groups. Marvin Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1985).
[30] McGowan's *Ascetic Eucharists* was particularly formative for me in his use of social theory to open up the possible theological meanings of the food "code" of the Christian Eucharist and in connecting it with diversity of practices. See also Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table*.
[31] Michael Dietler, "Alcohol: Anthropological/Archaeological Perspectives," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2006): 232.
[32] Yannis Hamilakis, "Food Technologies/Technologies of the Body: The Social Context of Wine and Oil Production and Consumption in Bronze Age Crete," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (1999): 38–54.
[33] Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 156–158.

down the highly polished surface of late Roman rhetoric, it is useful to employ the basic poststructuralist toolkit of searching for *aporiai* and inconsistencies, of pushing analogies to their breaking point, of collapsing binary systems, of reading against the grain. Late Roman writers are sophisticated users of rhetorical binaries who positively revel in paradox and *aporia*. But how do they justify, elide, and construct new meaning out of the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in their language? How does the sophisticated rhetoric of early Christian preachers connect with a nonelite audience? For these questions, cognitive or conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) has a great deal to offer.[34]

Originally popularized by Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, CMT proposes that metaphor – understanding one thing in terms of another – is not a mere literary device, but fundamental to how our minds structure knowledge.[35] We understand abstract ideas (target domains) by associating them with more concrete "bodies of coherently organized knowledge" (source domains). The source domain provides structure and meaning to the abstract target, by systematically correlating, or mapping, it with aspects of knowledge that make up the source domain. The more a metaphor coheres with universal aspects of embodied human experience and/or culturally accepted knowledge domains, the more likely it is to be experienced as well-founded or compelling.[36] We can distinguish conceptual metaphors, which express the relationship between two domains like IDEAS ARE FOOD, from linguistic expressions of these metaphors, words and phrases that use terminology associated with the source domain, like "I can't swallow that claim."[37]

In "traditional" CMT, one source domain was mapped onto one target through a set of mappings that transferred various aspects of meaning and structure from source to target. This two-domain model has proved too general and too simple to account fully for the complexities of metaphorically-structured thought.[38] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner

---

[34] George Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 202–251.

[35] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[36] Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor, a Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28–31.

[37] Ibid., 25–26, 104–105.

[38] Monika Fludernik, Donald C. Freeman, and Margaret H. Freeman, "Metaphor and Beyond: An Introduction," *Poetics Today* 20, no. 3 (1999): 383–396. Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 326–342.