



Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus

Contents

Introduction	334
Religious and Nonreligious Rituals of Eating: Rituals in the Strong Sense and in the Weak Sense	335
Eating Rituals in the Strong Sense	336
Eating Rituals in the Weak Sense	338
Types of Eating Rituals: A Formal Classification	339
Eating Rituals as Rituals of Relationship	340
With Nature	341
With Other Human Beings	341
With Supernatural Beings	342
Eating Rituals Are More Than Just <i>Eating</i> Rituals	344
Rituals and the Psychology of Taste	345
Conclusion	347
References	347

Abstract

Rituals of eating refer to the behaviors regarding what, with whom, when, where, how, and why people eat. They are patterned, repeated, sometimes automatic, sometimes intentionally mindful, often talk-enhanced practices that *humanize* the ways people nourish themselves. Rituals of eating might be, but are not necessarily “religious” in that they are associated with specific religious traditions. The difference between religious and nonreligious rituals of eating is better understood as between “rituals in a strong sense” and in a “weak sense” (Kripal et al. 2014). On one hand, they may be intentional “reenactment of myths – sacred

J. Brumberg-Kraus (✉)
Department of Religion, Wheaton College, Norton, MA, USA
e-mail: jkraus@wheatonma.edu

stories – that make worlds come into being” or they may be something like the daily cycles of breakfast, lunch, and dinner with appropriate foods at appropriate times.

Eating rituals also can be classified more specifically according to their form and sequence, their function, the emotions they evoke, and their meaning. This chapter addresses the roles of ritual in eating in the following: (1) as types of behaviors (order of meals, seasonally cued practices, table etiquette, taboos, eating, and reading); (2) as rituals of different kinds of relationships (to nature, to other humans, and to the supernatural); (3) as components of meals besides eating (preparation, acquisition, and cooking of food); (4) in the emotional affect they encourage (rituals of disgust, elevation, and gratitude); and (5) as the different strategies and contents of meaning they create. The role of ritual in eating is to make it meaningful to people – affectively, cognitively, socially, culturally, and religiously.

Introduction

Margaret Visser suggests in her book *The Rituals of Dinner* (1991) that table manners originated to curb human instincts to use one’s knives on their fellow diners rather than on their dinner. Table manners however are but a subset of the many different rituals people apply to what, with whom, when, where, how, and why they eat. All animals eat, but rituals, that is, patterned, repeated, sometimes automatic, sometimes intentionally mindful, often talk-enhanced behaviors are apparently what *humanize* the ways the human species nourishes itself. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825/1986), the early nineteenth-century father of modern Euro-American gastronomy and food writing, famously distinguished “the pleasures of the table. . .from the pleasure of eating, *their necessary antecedent*,” as follows:

The pleasure of eating is the actual and direct sensation of satisfying a need.

The pleasures of the table are a reflective sensation which is born from the various circumstances of place, time, things, and people who make up the surroundings of the meal.

The pleasure of eating is one we share with animals; it depends solely on hunger and what is needed to satisfy it.

The pleasures of the table are known only to the human race; they depend on careful preparations for the serving of the meal, on the choice of place, and the thoughtful assembling of the guests.

The pleasure of eating demands appetite, if not actual hunger; the pleasures of the table are most often independent of either one or the other...

During the first course, and at the beginning of the feast, everyone eats hungrily, without talking, without paying any attention to what may be going on about him, and no matter what his position or rank may be he ignores everything in order to devote himself to the great task at hand. But as these needs are satisfied, the

intellect rouses itself, conversation begins, a new order of behavior asserts itself, and the man who was no more than an eater until then becomes a more or less pleasant companion, according to his natural ability. (p. 182)

What are “careful preparations for the serving of the meal, on the choice of place, and the thoughtful assembling of the guests. . .[and] conversation . . . a new order of behavior” but rituals that not only shape the meal as a communal activity, but also enhances the *pleasure* of those eating at it?

Eating rituals, therefore, can be classified according to their form and sequence, their function, the emotions they evoke, and their meaning. To be more precise, one can categorize the roles of ritual in eating by as types of behaviors (order of meals, seasonally cued, table etiquette, taboos, eating, and reading); as rituals of different kinds of relationships (to nature, to other humans, and to the supernatural); as components of meals besides eating (preparation, acquisition, and cooking of food); by the emotional affect they encourage (rituals of disgust, elevation, and gratitude); and by the different strategies and contents of meaning they create.

Religious and Nonreligious Rituals of Eating: Rituals in the Strong Sense and in the Weak Sense

The word ritual often leads many to assume it refers to religious activities and interactions with deities. On the contrary, implicit in any discussion of ritual, including food rituals, is (or should be) the distinction most assume between “religious rituals,” like Christian Communion or the Jewish Passover Seder, and more ordinary ritual patterns of behavior, like breakfast in the morning, lunch midday, and dinner at night (which nowadays in modern industrialized societies are more honored in the breach than observed).

A more precise way to describe this sort of difference in rituals, which is especially applicable to the role of rituals in eating, is the distinction the critical scholars of the comparison of religions Jeffrey Kripal et al. (2014) draws between “ritual in the weak sense” and “ritual in the strong sense.” The weak sense of ritual “encompasses virtually all of human social behavior, taken as a coded and scripted set of actions that serve particular social and psychological functions” (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 117). The strong sense of ritual “requires something else: an invocation of superhuman powers and a fundamental orientation toward an order of reality and an eventual state of salvation that transcends the social world and its material and pragmatic needs” (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 117). This clearly corresponds to the differentiation between ordinary daily rituals and religious rituals made above but are preferable, because not all “religious” rituals, that is, rituals in the strong sense, can be associated with specific recognizable religious traditions. For rituals in this strong sense are “re-enactments of a myth,” with a myth being “a sacred story that founds and grounds a particular world” (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 116). Thus, this kind of a ritual is “is the reenactment of the myth that makes that world come into being.” The North American Thanksgiving dinner is a good example of a nonreligious ritual

that nevertheless reenacts a myth that makes the world come into being, in this case the world of the US nation. Though ostensibly associated with American Protestantism (a commemoration celebrating the Puritan pilgrims' meal with the native Americans who helped them survive their first winter in Massachusetts according to legend), both historically and in practice is far from that. Indeed, Gurinder Chadha's movie *What's Cooking?* (Taylor & Chadha 2000) delightfully demonstrates how four contemporary quite ethnically different families in LA, African American, Jewish American, Mexican American, and Vietnamese American, each make try to make the "traditional" American Thanksgiving turkey dinner their own. In other words, it is precisely because of its symbolic significance as the myth of American origins that the ethnically diverse families in the movie appropriate the Thanksgiving turkey dinner to enact their American identity as participants in America's story.

Eating Rituals in the Strong Sense

What's Cooking?'s representation of multiethnic American Thanksgiving rituals and "religious" meal rituals have in common two features Kripal defines as characteristic of ritual in the strong sense. First, as already stated, they are rituals that reenact a myth, that is, "a sacred story that founds and grounds a particular world" in order to make "that world come into being." In other words, when modern Mexican Americans roast a turkey on Thanksgiving for a big family meal (even if they adapt it to their own flavor preference) or when Christians eat bread and drink wine in the ritual of communion or when Jews reenact the Biblical Exodus story at the Passover Seder meal, they are in effect "inscribing" themselves in the same stories and therefore in the same worlds imagined and mapped in those stories. Meals like this, ritualized in the strong sense, are thus important mechanisms for what modern sociologists call "the social construction of reality" (Berger 1990). In these kinds of meal rituals in the strong sense, participants get to make their worlds and eat them, too, that is, make them so real they can taste them. A second feature religious and nonreligious meal rituals in the strong sense share is that they accomplish this "through scripted and repeated actions ("ritual"), usually performed in a culturally prescribed space and time and often by a religious specialist, who performs the myth through this ritual" (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 116). In other words, they take place at special prescribed times (e.g., religious and secular holidays or life cycle events) at special places (e.g., a church, a temple, a family dining room) and are conducted by "specialists" knowledgeable in the sacred lore (family matriarchs or patriarchs – keepers of the family recipes – or a priest, a rabbi, a religiously skilled layperson, etc.). These kinds of rituals do not happen at random places and times, nor are they conducted without some sort of expert exercising quality control. These specialist experts end up being boundary keepers, the ones who assure that the social groups the meal rituals are intended to form and the social worlds they are intended to enact maintain their integrity – so that they are perceived as authentic. But perhaps most importantly, it's these specialists who accentuate the

specialness of the eating rituals in the strong sense by evoking or literally invoking “the something else,” the “superhuman powers and a fundamental orientation toward an order of reality and an eventual state of salvation that transcends the social world and its material and pragmatic needs” (Kripal et al. 2014). Thus often rituals in the strong sense have participants say certain words over foods to attribute to them their special symbolic quality, such as repeating the words of Jesus saying “This is My body, this is My blood,” over bread and wine in the Christian Eucharist ritual, or Jewish Passover Seder participants applying verses from the Biblical story Exodus like “The bitter herb, because *the Egyptians embittered our lives*” to bitter greens or horseradish root. Or sometimes the context or occasion, not to mention the officiation of ritual specialists like priests or shamans, is enough to convey the symbolic quality of foods for the gods, even if words do not make it explicit, as in sacrifices when one is sharing food at a temple or shrine devoted to one or more gods. Indeed, the context and choreography of most food sacrifices, e.g., sending food “up” cooked in smoke, “bringing it near,” or “setting it apart” (to use the literal translation of some of the typical Biblical Hebrew verbs for sacrificing: *le-ha'alot*, *le-hekriv*, and *le-hakdish*, respectively) to where God or the gods “dwell,” imply the logic of what scholar of religion Ninian Smart (2000) calls “*do ut des*” [Latin for “I give so that you give”]. In other words, in sacrificial settings, participants understand that they’re giving something to the gods with the expectation that they will get something back in return: “material and pragmatic needs” like ecological and climatic conditions conducive to the fertility of their crops and livestock (or to their own fertility), forgiveness or atonement, victory in battle, or simply the pleasures of God or the gods’ company (etymologically, “sharing bread”).

Perhaps by this standard, Thanksgiving dinners like those in *What’s Cooking?* are not quite eating rituals in the strong sense, since the family dinner specialists don’t notably invoke superhuman powers or suggest that observance of the Thanksgiving meal festivities will bring about a “state of salvation that transcends the social world and its material and pragmatic needs.” Or don’t they? What if the American nation were to be substituted for superhuman powers, and the sense of belonging to the America of the Thanksgiving story were a kind of salvation for the Black, Mexican, Vietnamese, and Jewish families not so secure about their status as real Americans? However one answers this, it’s important to make the point that the distinction between eating rituals in the strong sense and in the weak sense is not meant to be a value judgment that one type is more important or more meaningful than the other. Rather, it’s meant to acknowledge differences in the consciousness, intentionality, and relationship to recognizably acknowledged religious traditions in the practices of those who perform eating rituals when describing them. In a certain sense, all eating rituals are both weak and strong. They are weak in the sense that they are all “coded and scripted set of actions that serve particular social and psychological functions.” They are strong in the sense that they all “re-enact myths that make the world come into being,” even if strictly speaking, in rituals in the weak sense this is not a particularly conscious intent. Thus, Kripal correctly summarizes the ritual functions of food when he says, “Food helps make a world. Food is belonging. Food is boundary. Food is story. Food is performance. Food is self (p. 149).”

Eating Rituals in the Weak Sense

The point of calling attention to food rituals in the weak sense is that they do not only have to be experienced as extraordinarily special or “sacred” (to use the religious studies term) to nevertheless convey these world-making, belonging-making boundary-making, and story-making, self-performing powers of food. There are many day-to-day ritual practices of food taboos which habituate patterns of preferences for some foods over others. Some, like Jewish “keeping kosher,” Muslim observance of the rules of halal or daylight fasting during the month of Ramadan (the reader is referred to the Handbook Chapter by Regenstein on kosher and halal food), Indian Brahmin or Jain avoidance of meat, or Catholic fish on Friday and no meat all during Lent are religiously motivated, at least in their origins. However, even among members of those religious communities, there is a wide variation of practice. Some follow the rules out of custom or habit rather than for consciously “religious reasons,” and some even deliberately transgress them to express their identity (like Jews who eat pork to make a point that they are not bound by religious law or Muslims who drink alcoholic beverages for similar reasons). And people practice many other day-to-day food taboos and preferences that are not necessarily religiously motivated, such as vegetarianism and veganism done for ethical, ecological, health, and aesthetic reasons (the reader is referred to the Handbook Section on Ethics); eating local, sustainably produced, and/or organic foods; various diet regimens intended for weight loss or other health concerns; paleo diets; raw food diets, etc. Carbs, fats, and sugar can be just as taboo to practitioners of these diets as pork chops are to observant Jews, Muslims, or Jains.

Another significant example of regular food rituals in the weak sense is the daily cycle of breakfast, lunch, and dinner typical in many societies around the world, which do vary from culture to culture (such as continental vs. full breakfasts, lunch as the main meal of the day vs. dinner, or even what constitutes typical breakfast, lunch, or dinner foods). For example, Americans who are used to eggs or cereal for breakfast are often surprised when travelling to Middle Eastern countries how much more prominent vegetables are on the breakfast menu. And in much of modern western industrialized, workaholic cultures today, the three-meals-a-day pattern is observed more in the breach than in actual practices. People skip meals, substitute a power shake for meals with courses, and grab something to eat on the work commute. Or they may “graze” throughout the day at their own pace, eating when they’re hungry, rather than at the societally specified breakfast, lunch, and dinner times, or at high and low tea times in places still under the influence of the meal culture of the British Commonwealth. And yet, institutions such as schools, colleges, restaurants, hospitals, prisons, and airline companies (albeit less so recently) still tend to structure their service of meals around the basic ritually repeated practice of morning, midday, and evening meals.

The most well-known and influential discussion of this sort of regular system of daily, weekly, and seasonal meals is the anthropologist Mary Douglas’ classic essay “Deciphering a Meal” (1972). By analyzing the typical patterns of the British meals of her native culture, Douglas demonstrated that the system of meals worked a lot

like a language, in which the order, number, and specific components of a meal, and of meals during the day, week, and year functioned like syntax or grammar, to make meals and their parts follow very predictable patterns. All meals, from the simplest breakfast to the most complicated Sunday or Christmas dinner, were more or less related to one another, through the multiplication of dishes with varying connotations. “Mains,” “sides,” soups, drinks, sweets/desserts, starches, vegetables, and fruits each have a significance in comparison to one another, as well as in combination. Breakfast, a lighter meal, may have very few courses, a main that is not a meat (eggs, a cereal), though meat (like sausage or bacon) may be as a side, and a drink (juice, coffee, tea). But compare that to a Sunday dinner, or something like an American Thanksgiving dinner that might have a soup or other appetizers, two meat mains, two starch sides, two vegetable sides, more than one sweet for dessert, and different kinds of drinks (some alcoholic, some not) served at the beginning, during, and after the main course. Moreover, mains and sides are usually savory (though sometimes sweetened to mark a special holiday meal); desserts sweet. Sides are usually a combination of starches and vegetables, not just only one or the other. Nor would one normally expect to have scrambled eggs or hot oatmeal as a main for a Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner or chocolate mousse for an appetizer before the mains. One knows this because of the implicit codes Douglas says are at play in the British system of meals but by implication could be “deciphered” analogously in any system of meals in any human culture. And these are not just codes to impose order on chaos, though of course they do that. They are “coded and scripted set of actions that serve particular social and psychological functions” (Kripal et al. 2014), that is, rituals in the weak sense that serve to create and maintain the social boundaries of family, culture, ethnicity, and class. Table etiquette, which likewise varies from culture to culture (e.g., Euro-American eating with forks, knives, and spoons; Indian and Arab etiquette of eating with one’s hands; East Asian etiquette eating with chopsticks), performs similar, complementary functions. This becomes quite clear, sometimes awkwardly, for guests at meals in the home of people whose culture and accompanying table etiquette are quite different from their own (Visser 1991; Harvey 2013).

Types of Eating Rituals: A Formal Classification

In addition to differentiating eating rituals by their social functions, or better, the degree of their practitioners’ intentionality and awareness of them as rituals with world-making, group-defining social functions, eating rituals may also be classified according to their form. Though the list of types of eating rituals to follow reiterates some of the rituals used as examples in the discussion above of rituals in the strong and weak senses, and cannot be claimed to be exhaustive, it nevertheless provides a good overview of the most generally recognizable forms of eating rituals. They are

1. **Orders of meals:** both the “courses” within them (e.g., appetizer, main course, dessert; drinks, before, during, and after the main course) and where they fit in the

- day, e.g., breakfast, lunch, dinner, in between meal snacks, high and low teas, happy hours for drinks, etc.) with variations from culture to culture
2. **Seasonally cued meal rituals** (harvest festival meals like Jewish Sukkot or American Thanksgiving, Halloween trick or treating; Christmas dinners; the Jewish Passover Seder or Persian New Year's day Nowruz festive meals in the spring; 4th of July picnics in the summer, evening Muslim "break fasts" *iftar* meals during the month of Ramadan; or annual meals commemorating other sorts of historical events, like Scottish Robert Burns Day or African American Juneteenth meals)
 3. **Meals occasioned by rites of passage**, like wedding banquets, birthday parties, *quinceañeras*, baby namings, or funerals
 4. **Table etiquette rules** governing seating, table settings (what kinds of utensils if any and how they're arranged), what to wear, guest and host responsibilities, respect for social hierarchies and gender roles, appropriate postures and behaviors (like eating with your mouth shut, not burping or farting), etc. which of course also vary from culture to culture
 5. **Dietary taboos**: prohibited or permitted foods as discussed above, which involve not only specifying from which plant, animal, and nonorganic sources foods may or may not be eaten but also how they are prepared (e.g., kosher meat must be salted and drained of blood; organic produce cannot be grown using certain pesticides or fertilizers), and official or semiofficial authorities who supervise their production and preparation and certify that the foods have met the required standards (e.g., the Jewish Orthodox Union, the US FDA, Muslim halal inspectors, etc.)
 6. **"Scripted meals,"** that is, meals that involve the saying, singing, and/or reading of specific words accompanying the eating, which can range from improvised or prescribed food blessings, to reading and performing actual scripts like the Jewish Passover Haggadah, to suggested talking points, to shared song sheets, short readings brought or composed by the participants, to formal speeches

Particularly, notable literary representations of this are the speeches praising the god of Love in Plato's *Symposium* or General Löwenhielm's speech at the banquet in the movie *Babette's Feast* (Betzer et al. 2003, based on the short story by Isak Dinesen [1950/1993]; Brumberg-Kraus 2008). In short, since rituals are "scripted and repeated actions. . . usually performed in a culturally prescribed space and time and often by a religious specialist" (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 116), it makes sense to categorize eating rituals formally according to which sort of scripts and repeated actions they are comprised of (not to mention what "ingredients" and other "props" are used in them), where and on what occasions they are performed, who conducts them, and for whom.

Eating Rituals as Rituals of Relationship

Since eating rituals are fundamentally social activities – even when eating alone one follows the types of socially determined codes and patterned behaviors discussed

above – they are inherently relational. In other words, eating rituals typically construct human relationships with the natural world, with other human beings, and with supernatural beings.

With Nature

It is not precisely accurate to say human beings construct relationships with “nature” through eating rituals, since in the ecology of things, humans are a part of nature, not apart from it. In this sense, Graham Harvey’s (2013) definition of religion aptly applies to eating rituals as well. They are about respecting relationships between human and other than human persons – including other animals, plants, rivers, rocks, gods, mountains, celestial bodies, and so on. In terms of nature, humans, like other animals, are evolutionarily, cognitively “hard-wired” to recognize and distinguish between three main ways of relating to things in the environment in order to survive: Is it food? Is it a potential mate? Or is it a predator? Perhaps the taboos against eating other humans, having sex with animals or inanimate objects, or eating other animals that might see humans as food (not that any of these taboos are absolute given the variety of human practices) are rooted in these basic distinctions. Eating rituals, to the extent they maintain these categories, code and pattern relationships to fellow beings in the natural world as food, partner, or predator. That certainly puts Visser’s (1991) observation with which this chapter opened in the proper light: table manners originated to curb our instincts to use our knives on our fellow diners rather than on our dinner. In any case, to have rituals designated for how to treat food implies that there are *different* rituals designated for how to treat potential mates, as well as for how to treat – that is, fight or flee from – potentially dangerous predators or rivals for resources. In other words, eating rituals are part of a whole system of rituals that are nothing less than “reenactments” of the myths that found and ground particular worlds to make those worlds “come into being” (Kripal et al. 2014, p. 116). Put differently, these ritual systems presume and imply “sacred stories” that cast all the denizens of the natural world in specific roles – relationships – vis-a-vis one another, which in effect constructs a cosmos, an ordered world of relationships between all that is. Most pertinently for conscious beings like humans, these ritual reenactments map out what is food, (and what isn’t), who could be a mate (and who or what isn’t), and who or what is out to get us (or isn’t). Thus, in his aptly titled book *Food, Sex, and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, Graham Harvey (2013) focuses on the world-making *rituals* of “religion” – understood as respecting *relations* between humans and other than human persons – by describing religions (or for a more neutral term, worldviews) as kinds of “cosmic etiquette” varying across cultures.

With Other Human Beings

Nevertheless, eating rituals are still quite concerned about relations with other people. Meals are basically social rituals that form and shape boundaries between people. Some meal rituals are rituals of inclusion (e.g., “family style” vs. serving

people their meals on separate dishes; potlucks; the free vegetarian meals open to all served from the *langars* [communal kitchens] in Sikh temples; anticipating or asking guests beforehand what their dietary constraints are and providing accordingly; inviting non-Jewish guests to Passover seders, non-Christian guests to Christmas dinners, etc.). Others are rituals of separation, such as when one's own food taboos prohibit them from eating in others' homes; arranging children's and adult tables; distinguishing head tables from other tables, like the faculty tables in British colleges; seating segregated by gender; rules for admission and membership for exclusive eating clubs; "no shoes, no shirts, no service"-type dress codes at restaurants; pricing menu items beyond the reach of most consumers at high-end restaurants; the rituals of first class, business class, and economy class seating and food service on airlines; segregation or exclusion of people from eating establishments because of their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality; restriction of certain parts of Biblical sacrifices to male hereditary priests and their families; etc. The practice of many elderly as well as young "unattached" adults to eat alone is also a kind of "ritual of separation," regardless if that is the eater's choice, or a matter of circumstance beyond the eater's control (e.g., loss of one's spouse or other significant other[s]) economics, social isolation because of where one lives, being socially ostracized as a pariah, etc.). Finally, the specific rules and responsibilities of host and guests are often codified in lists of meal rules, such as those enumerated in ancient Jewish rabbinic *derekh erez* literature, Greek and Roman eating club rules parodied by the second-century CE writer Lucian, and this passage from the Gospel of Luke 14:7–14 (New Revised Standard Version) in the Christian New Testament attributed to Jesus:

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

One could find similar rules for proper host and guest behavior in modern etiquette advice columns (e.g., Galanes 2012) or etiquette books (e.g., Post 1994; Martin 2005) in the appropriate sections.

With Supernatural Beings

Eating rituals that establish and maintain relationships with supernatural beings are of two types: those that involve the supernatural beings as companions, hosts, or

guests at meals, or those in which the supernatural beings are themselves the food which is consumed, literally or figuratively. Supernatural beings may include God, the gods, deceased ancestors, nature spirits, ghosts, demons, in short, any other beings perceived as being somehow “more” than those ordinarily met in nature. That said, in most non-Christian or Biblically based, non-monotheistic religious or cultural traditions, such as the indigenous cultures of Native Americans, the Maori of New Zealand, or the Yoruba of Nigeria, or Shinto in Japan, these kinds of beings are not considered to be unnatural or apart from nature; they are simply other than *human* beings (Harvey 2013), though perhaps they may be *superhuman* (Kripal et al. 2014). The most well-known example of a ritual in which God, incarnate in his Son Jesus Christ, is food and drink to be consumed, is Christian communion, the Eucharist. But in many other traditions, there are gods who are foods, such as the *soma* consumed in the Hindu Rig Veda hymns, or the Aztec and Mayan corn (maize) god or goddess. Moreover, in some cultures, deceased ancestors may also be consumed (often as ground bones or burnt into powder mixed with other foods but sometimes in smellier, earthier, less refined forms), in what Visser (1991) calls endocannibalism, as part of mourning rituals.

Perhaps more typical are rituals that treat gods, ancestors, or other supernatural beings as hosts or guests at meals. Sacrifice rituals in which animal or plant food offerings are made to the gods in their temples or other shrines devoted to them, that is, shared with them in their “houses,” have already been mentioned. These shrines may also be located in family homes, such as shrines in Hindu homes where images of deities are offered foods, bathed in clarified butter, and dressed (what Eck [1981] describes as “playing house with the gods”), or the idea in post-Biblical rabbinic Jewish traditions that the dinner table is a *mikdash me’at* – a “mini-temple” – where God can still be served through sharing food, in lieu of the sacrifices that can no longer be performed in the Jerusalem Temple destroyed in 70 CE. The Jewish tradition of separating *hallah*, a portion of dough set aside when making bread and burnt (for God), which has become the term for the braided or round egg breads typically served for Sabbath and holiday meals, is another way of sharing food with God even after the temple sacrifices are no longer possible (Brumberg-Kraus 2018). The traditions across cultures for verbally invoking the gods by name are ways of acknowledging them as the hosts of one’s meals, such as the classical Greek and Roman invocations of the gods before meals, Christian grace, or Muslims uttering *bismillah* (“in the name of God”) before eating or slaughtering animals for meat. The opening blessing before the Jewish grace after meals is literally called “the blessing of invitation” (*birkat ha-zimman*), in which the meal participants explicitly acknowledge that it was from God’s table they ate, “Blessed are You Our God, from Whose table we have eaten.” The presence of dead ancestors may also be acknowledged as if they were guests at meals, whether formally, in home shrines especially in East Asian cultures where food is offered to them or when the yet unburied bodies of family members might be present in the homes where the living family members live (such as in the funeral practices of the Toraja in Indonesia [Montagnon et al. 1977/2001; Crystal 1974], or the roots of some Halloween traditions featured in Ray Bradbury’s animated movie based on his novel *The Halloween Tree* [Kirschner et al. 1972/1993/2016]), or informally, in the conversations recalling deceased

or otherwise absent family members that typically arise during family seasonal or rite-of-passage meal celebrations. Nature spirits too may be considered as guests welcome to partake of food consumed by humans, as the Indonesian Toraja who shared their rice harvest with rats, understood as the embodiment of such spirits. However, this could go awry, as when the rats consumed too much of the rice harvest, which some Toraja understood as retribution for the increasing adoption of Christianity in place of their traditional indigenous ways (Hollan 1988). In a sense, all acts of eating directly or indirectly involve some kind of violence between humans and other than human beings which threatens their fundamental “relationality” and must somehow address and repair the breaches that living in the world requires. (The reader is referred to the Handbook Section on Ethics). In Graham Harvey’s view (informed especially by the modern Maori religious thinker T. P. Tawhai), the basic point of religions is to provide rituals to negotiate this necessary oscillation between acts of violence and reconciliation basic to our existence in the real world. As Harvey puts it, “[R]eligion occurs when people face their victims,” – animal, vegetable, and mineral; natural and super-natural –

fully cognisant that reciprocity is integral to relationality, and seek to enhance intimacy with others despite violence. Religious activity is undertaken when, *in ritual and etiquette*, in restraint and celebration, and in honouring mana and taboo, people seek permission and offer placation either for necessary but nonetheless wrongful acts of violence. (p. 116)

In other words, if indeed, “religion is etiquette in the real world” (Harvey, p. 199), then rituals of eating, which are all about structuring people’s relationships to the real world, engage people in “religious,” or at least religion-like behavior, whether conscious of it or not.

Eating Rituals Are More Than Just *Eating* Rituals

Since much of the violence related to eating usually has occurred long before the food has actually arrived at the table to eat – e.g., in the killing of animals for food, in the harvesting of produce out of the soil, or in the often inequitable economics of production and distribution of food – one must point out the importance of the rituals of food preparation when discussing the role of rituals in eating. The two main categories for food preparation rituals are (1) the rituals of acquiring foods and (2) the rituals of cooking foods. In the first, by whom and how are foods acquired? Grown oneself, bought in open markets, in grocery stores or chains, prepared at restaurants (fast food and more formal and/or expensive), ordered and delivered on-line, etc.? Is the food acquired by begging, either necessitated by the eater’s poverty, or to make a symbolic point, that the eater is detached from material things and striving for them, as in the case of Theravada Buddhist and Jain monks, or the practice of the Jesus and earliest apostles as itinerant charismatic healers and preachers, to demonstrate their faith in God to supply their needs (albeit through the hospitality of their sympathizing communities). Gerd Theissen (1978) aptly calls

this practice “charismatic begging.” This also benefitted the ordinary Buddhists, Jains, and Christians who acquired merit or blessing for feeding their teachers. And each of these stages or options of food acquisition has its own set of patterned and repeated typical behaviors. Is it daily, weekly, less frequent, seasonal, or hunger impulse driven? Jewish Biblical and post-Biblical traditions are particularly notable for their extensive rules not only for eating food but also agricultural rules: how and when plants are to be harvested; how animals are to be raised, slaughtered, and apportioned between ordinary Israelites, priests, and their families, and God in the sacrificial system; which rules are to be practiced when the sacrificial system no longer exists after the destruction of the temple and exile of Jews from the land of Israel after 70 CE? (Brumberg-Kraus 2015). And one can find similar kinds of rule books for agriculture in other traditions (not to mention farmers’ almanacs) as well as for sacrifices. As for rituals of shopping for foods, everyone who has themselves or knows others who observe the kinds of dietary restrictions discussed above is familiar with the rituals of checking labels for ingredients and/or appropriate certifications. Likewise, when dining out, there are the rituals of checking for problematic ingredients by asking if something is made with chicken stock, is gluten free, contains nuts, etc. And cooking food also has its own set of rituals, from following family customs and traditions for preparing certain dishes, to intentionally using inherited family heirloom cookware (e.g., a favorite pot or knife), to the religious rules governing the preparation of halal or kosher foods in the kitchen (like discarding eggs with bloodspots or using separate sets of dishes and cookware for dairy and meat preparations, to the conventions “inscribed” and also varying in time and place in the phrasing and order of instructions in cookbooks. And as in the rituals of food acquisition, so in food cooking, one can ask: Is it males or females, parents or children, professionals or nonprofessionals, members of particular social classes or from specific racial and ethnic backgrounds who are assigned or who have voluntarily taken on the tasks of cooking? Indeed, the significant decrease of people who do their own cooking at home from scratch in contemporary Western industrialized societies is itself a remarkable shift in the ritual practices of cooking. Michael Pollan, in his book *Cooked* (2013), intended to stem this trend, nevertheless acknowledges the views of some that pretty soon home cooking will be as rare or obsolete as making one’s own clothes. Given this trend, the rarer occasions for home cooking tend to be ritualized – for seasonal holidays, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, or for birthdays. That said, the occasions for opting not to cook (that is, paying others to cook) by going out to dinner or arranging caterers to celebrate a birthday, wedding, anniversary, retirement, school graduations, etc., may also be understood as seasonal, life cycle, or otherwise patterned and predictable rituals.

Rituals and the Psychology of Taste

Whatever social constructing, world-building functions the rituals of eating and preparing food have, especially in negotiating people’s complex relationships in and with the real world, they are able to do so because of the tremendous

psychological power rituals have on the human experience of eating. First, certain emotions can be specifically associated with eating (Rozin 1999), namely, disgust (Rozin et al. 1997), “the emotion of elevation,” (Haidt 2003) and gratitude (Algoe and Haidt 2009). According to Algoe and Haidt (2009), elevation is the emotion

elicited by acts of charity, gratitude, fidelity, generosity, or any other strong display of virtue. It leads to distinctive physical feelings; a feeling of ‘dilation’ or opening in the chest, combined with the feeling that one has been uplifted or ‘elevated’ in some way. It gives rise to a specific motivation or action tendency: emulation, the desire ‘of doing charitable and grateful acts also.’

While disgust for social vice (elevation’s “opposite”) is obviously associated with food preferences, in that bitter tasting foods tend to trigger the same disgust reflex (Rozin et al.), the connection between the “other-praising” emotions of elevation and gratitude to eating is a bit more complicated. The link is oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, which plays a role both in modulating preferences and satiation for the taste of sweetness (Leng and Sabatier 2017) and is released when people experience the emotions of elevation and gratitude (Algoe & Haidt). Without going too deeply into the chemistry, suffice it to say that when oxytocin is released in diners’ brains during a meal either because of eating tasty sweets or because of their admiration for their company’s behavior and/or their ritualized expressions of gratitude, the ensuing emotion of elevation may make the meal (ful)filling even without eating as much food as the diners may have initially craved. In other words, good company and the emotions that go with it may be as satisfying as eating the food itself. The right words and gestures at the meal, that is, rituals of eating, already discussed above, can prompt this emotional effect. Moreover, in their study, Vohs et al. (2013, p. 1715) demonstrate that rituals per se, defined as “symbolic activity that often includes repeated and unusual behaviors occurring in fixed, episodic sequences,” can make food actually taste better. Finally, rituals can have the psychological effect of *changing* one’s taste preferences, in what Prescott (2012) calls “evaluative conditioning.” Though people may be “hard-wired” to like or dislike particular flavors – most children prefer sweet to bitter foods, and some people for genetic reasons cannot abide the taste of cilantro – none of this is written in stone. Human taste preferences are nearly infinitely malleable, depending upon situation and habituation. A case in point is that while many children do not like the bitter tastes of coffee or beer, acquiring a taste for them is somewhat incentivized by their association with adulthood. Practiced as rituals of adulthood, such acquired tastes exemplify evaluative conditioning. And the reverse can happen. A traumatic experience associated with a food once liked can turn one off to it from then on. Most of the taste preferences for celebratory seasonal foods, family dishes, or the familiar cuisines of one’s own culture discussed above were acquired through the evaluative conditioning of regular habitual ritual practices. Indeed, it is the psychological effect of rituals of eating to associate “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (Geertz 1973 pp. 90, 94) to specific foods, situations, places, and people that give these rituals in the strong sense their world-making power.

Conclusion

The role of ritual in eating is to make it meaningful to people – affectively, cognitively, socially, culturally, and, yes, religiously. However, the meaningfulness of eating rituals is not “religious” in the sense that they necessarily require or imply adherence to specific faith traditions or belief systems. Rather, the rituals involved in the daily and necessary acts of human eating are “religious” in the role they play in coding and “scripting” sets of actions that serve particular social and psychological functions, in reenacting myths that make worlds come into being, whether those who practice them are aware of it or not. In particular, because food is so “fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching” (Rozin 1999), the rituals associated with it are nothing less than a kind of implicit or explicit “cosmic etiquette.” Rituals of eating form the fundamental *relationships* people have with the human and other than human persons with whom *we* cohabit in the real world. Are they food, foes, or friends? Fellow diner or dinner? Rituals of eating are a subset of *all* the *rituals of respecting relationships* between human and other than human persons in the world. In other words, how should we behave with them appropriately? The first step toward this respect is to abandon the omniscient third person objective pose, a linguistic ritual of hyperseparation that as scholars we are somehow outside or above this network of relationships in nature (Harvey 2013).

References

- Algoe, S. B., & Haidt, J. (2009). Witnessing excellence in action: The “other-praising” emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(2), 105–127.
- Berger, P. L. (1990). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Betzer, B., Christensen, B. (Producers), & Axel, G. (Director). (2003). *Babette's feast* [Motion picture]. Australia: Kaleidoscope Film. (Originally produced 1987)
- Brillat-Savarin, J. A. (1986). *The physiology of taste; or, meditations on transcendental astronomy*. (M. F. K. Fisher, Trans.). San Francisco: North Point Press. (Original work published 1825).
- Brumberg-Kraus, J. (2015). Food and meals. In B. A. Strawn (Ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the Bible and law* (Vol. 1, pp. 287–296). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brumberg-Kraus, J. (2008). “Torah on the table:” A sensual morality. In S. Friedland (Ed.), *Food and morality* (pp. 47–56). Totnes: Prospect Books.
- Brumberg-Kraus, J. (2018). *Gastronomic Judaism as culinary midrash*. Lanham: Lexington Press.
- Crystal, E. (1974). Cooking pot politics: A Toraja village study. *Indonesia*, 18, 119–151.
- Dinesen, I. [Blixen, K.]. (1993). Babette's feast. In *Anecdotes of destiny; and, Ehrengard* (pp. 21–59). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1950).
- Douglas, M. (1972). Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus*, 101(1), 61–81.
- Eck, D. L. (1981). *Darsan: Seeing the divine image in India*. Chambersburg: Anima Books.
- Galanes, P. (2012, April 26). Social qs: Stop fishing for lunch dates. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/column/social-qs>
- Geertz, C. (1973). Religion as a cultural system. In *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (Fifth Pr. edition, pp. 87–125). New York: Basic Books.

- Haidt, J. (2003). Elevation and the positive psychology of morality. In C. L. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 275–289). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Harvey, G. (2013). *Food, sex and strangers: Understanding religion as everyday life*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd.
- Hollan, D. (1988). Pockets full of mistakes: The personal consequences of religious change in A Toraja Village. *Oceania*, 58(4), 275–289.
- Kirschner, D., Piluso, M., Young, M. (Producers), & Piluso, M. (Director). (2016). *The Halloween Tree* [Videorecording]. Burbank: Warner Brothers. (Originally produced by Hanna-Barbera 1993 based on the book by Bradbury, R. 1972)
- Kripal, J. J., Jain, A. R., Prophet, E., & Anzali, A. (2014). *Comparing religions: Coming to terms* (p. 2014). Malden: Wiley Blackwell.
- Leng, G., & Sabatier, N. (2017). Oxytocin – The sweet hormone? *Trends in Endocrinology and Metabolism*, 28(5), 365–376.
- Martin, J. (2005). *Miss manners' guide to excruciatingly correct behavior*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Montagnon, P., Scorer, M., Stedall, J., Feuerstein, M., & Lewis, B. (Producers). (2001). *Religion in Indonesia: The way of the ancestors. V. 8, in The long search* [DVD]. New York: Ambrose/BBC (Original aired as television series 1977).
- Pollan, M. (2013). *Cooked: A natural history of transformation* (1st ed.). New York: Penguin Press HC.
- Post, E. (1994). *Emily post on guests and hosts*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Prescott, J. (2012). *Taste matters: Why we like the foods we do*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rozin, P. (1999). Food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching. *Social Research*, 66, 9–30.
- Rozin, P., Haidt, J., McCauley, C., & Imada, S. (1997). Disgust: The cultural evolution of a food-based emotion. In H. M. Macbeth (Ed.), *Food preferences and taste: Continuity and change* (pp. 65–82). Providence: Berghahn Books.
- Smart, N. (2000). *Worldviews: Crosscultural explorations of human beliefs* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- Taylor, J. (Producer), & Chadha, G. (Director). (2000). *What's cooking?* [Motion picture]. Santa Monica: Trimark Home Video.
- Theissen, G. (1978). *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Visser, M. (1991). *The rituals of dinner: The origins, evolution, eccentricities, and meaning of table manners* (Vol. 1st American). New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Vohs, K. D., Wang, Y., Gino, F., & Norton, M. I. (2013). Rituals enhance consumption. *Psychological Science*, 24(9), 1714–1721.