



Religion and Food, Religions as Foodways *Religião e Comida, religião como regras para alimentação*

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Abstract: Foodways (everything related to the production and consumption of food) are gaining increasing attention in studies of religion. They allow us to achieve better understanding of the fluid relationships between everyday lives and formal rituals, rules and hierarchies. This article seeks to demonstrate that more is at stake in research and teaching about religion and food. In considering foodways we do not simply add spice (aka rich description) to our work. Theorisation about religion is vastly improved when we engage with (a) the ways in which people deal with the necessary acts of violence involved in consuming other species, and (b) with the ways in which people eat or avoid eating particular foods with other people. It reinforces the need for vernacular, material and performative issues to be placed firmly at the centre of our discipline. Studying foodways allows us to replace unhelpful (early modern polemical) questions about beliefs with more focused questions about the doing of religion in real world, everyday contexts.

Key words: Religion; food; taboo; ritual; relationality; violence

Resumo: Comida e tudo o que ela implica (de produção ao seu consumo) está ganhando uma crescente atenção nos estudos em religião. Isso nos permite alcançar um melhor entendimento das relações fluídicas entre a vida cotidiana e as formas rituais, regras e hierarquias. Este artigo busca demonstrar que há muito mais em jogo na pesquisa sobre religião e comida. Considerando-se a alimentação, nós não apenas adicionamos temperos em nosso trabalho. Teorização sobre religião é amplamente aprimorada quando conectamos com (a) formas pelas quais as pessoas lidam com os necessários atos de violência envolvidos no consumo de certas espécies, e (b) com as maneiras pelas quais pessoas comem ou evitam comer alimentos particulares com outras pessoas. Isso reforça a necessidade de se estabelecer firmemente no centro de nossa disciplina, questões vernáculas, materiais e performáticas. Estudadas questões relativas à alimentação nos permite substituir questões inúteis (polêmicas do início da modernidade) sobre crenças por questões mais focalizadas tais como fazer religião no mundo real em contextos cotidianos.

Palavras-chave: Religião; comida; tabu; ritual; relacionalidade; violência

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Should students interested in religions be introduced to foodways rather than belief systems? Should researchers ask “what do you eat?” rather than “what do you believe?” on first embarking on fieldwork? Might religion have originated as a way of dealing with the necessity of eating other living beings rather than as a cognitive error? In non-anthropocentric contexts these questions might carry more power because “what we eat” and “other living beings” could be considered to be “our relations”. So, if people have to kill some of our relations in order to live, but also consider killing to be a bad and disrespectful way of relating, how can they continue eating? Perhaps the first step is restricting what is permissible for eating. The resulting taboos may bring with them the extra advantage of aiding people to distinguish between “those with whom we eat” and “those with whom we do not eat”. In-groups and out-groups, or “us” and “strangers”, are swiftly established or more securely framed. Food rules have the function of creating and maintaining communities as well as the effect of teaching that consumption is not neutral. Restrictions on what can be consumed indicate that restraint is a good thing: it encourages people to limit their own behaviours or desires in order to increase care for the well-being of others. Nonetheless, in order for one being to eat, another must die. How can that be dealt with? Alongside taboo protocols, there are practices in which violent life-taking acts can be negotiated. Ritualists might mediate with those beings which (or who) are deemed acceptable to eat. They might seek ways to enable willingly sacrificial deaths by communicating with other-than-human communities or individuals. Other forms of ritualised consumption proliferate within religious cultures to enable or evoke communion with deities, ancestors and other significant persons. Rules around the preparation and conduct of these (sometimes symbolic) meals are braided into differentiations between genders, ages, classes or castes, and hierarchies.

In these and other ways, the benefits and problems of eating within a pervasively relational world (as ours is according to both Darwin and most indigenous religious traditions) rife with social differentiation requires both taboos and rituals. These, rather than peculiar ideas, non-falsifiable postulations or irrational acts of believing, are the definitive components of religion. At least, this is what I seek to demonstrate in this article.

All our relations

Each round of prayers during Lakota style sweat lodge ceremonies echoes the refrain “all our relations”. Those who enter the confined and darkened spaces of sweat lodges do so to purify themselves in order to serve others by offering prayers for their well-being. Water poured over heated stones that have been brought into the centre of the lodge produces steam and raises the temperature dramatically. People sweat, but

they are not alone. The stones themselves are named “grandfathers”, an honorific among many Native Americans. The production of intense heat and steam are not primarily valued as mechanistic technologies but as personal relations or the generous gift of ceremonial co-workers. The grandfather rocks give up their lives to enable the sweating humans to offer their service to others. In each of four rounds of praying for the well-being of other persons (human and other-than-human), the participants call out to powerful helpers to notice their self-sacrifice, purity of commitment, and specific prayers. When they say “all our relations” at the close of each round (before taking short breaks outside of the lodge), participants affirm their kinship with all beings, express hopes for widespread and/or specific benefits, and request support in enacting desired changes. Whatever else they achieve in “sweating” in this way, participants reaffirm their place in an expansive web of relations.

Charles Darwin, too, teaches us that we humans are more-or-less closely related to all other beings in this planet. He not only propelled forward the study of human evolution from ancestral pre-humans but enriched debates about the processes of this proliferating kinship. After Darwin, it should not be possible to act as if humans were in any way separate from the processes by which life circulates. We may be distinctive in our still-evolving present form but each building block of our nature and/or our culture (whatever these terms might mean) can be found in other species. Other animals are capable of making music, deceiving others, mourning their dead, assaulting victims, crafting tools and other skilled repertoires of learned behaviour. Plants also evidence intentional activity, e.g. in alerting their neighbours to the presence of predators or in promising (not always truthfully) the availability of nectar to potential pollinators. In short, humans co-evolved as members of multi-species communities, making up ecosystems in defined locations and planetary life when considered more globally.

There is more. What we are pleased to think of as an individual human being is in reality a symbiotic community. Just as lichens are inseparable, interdependent and interacting fusions of fungi and algae and/or cyanobacteria so humans are necessarily in symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationships with bacteria. There are “good bacteria” (as advertisers tell us) who thrive in our guts, breaking down what we eat so that they and we can thrive. There are bacteria who dwell in the crooks of our elbows, preferring that habitat to any other while also making it different from other areas of skin.¹ These relationships are so intimately integrated and mutually constructive that when we say “I eat” we should say “we eat”. “My” elbow crook is “ours” too. Knowing that there are more non-human cells within our bodies might encourage us to think of ourselves as ecosystems worthy of as much protection as any other area of the “natural world”. We

¹ N. WADE. *Bacteria Thrive in Inner Elbow: No Harm Done.*

are communities in which balancing the needs of our relations (an all-embracing category) can be precarious but usually leads to mutual benefits.

These may seem like merely interesting, intriguing or amusing asides. What do they have to do with religion? For one thing, religion is usually theorised as being a uniquely human and peculiarly cognitive but irrational exercise. However, if humans are like other beings, we could expect religion to be some aspect of the ways in which we relate with others. It certainly cannot be an alien intrusion into everyday life but must have connections to what persons (human or other-than-human) do when they relate with others. I propose that we need a post-anthropocentric way of thinking about the world, ourselves and religion.² That is, we should follow Ken Morrison's³ lead in rejecting the notions of a depersonalised "nature" and a spiritualised social reality (i.e. one constructed around tropes of belief and transcendence). Scholars who seek to understand how religion and food relate to each other are already thinking about the nature of the real world in which religious people do religion in everyday contexts. Since the ordinary, everyday, evolving world of multi-species relationality is the real world, it is the right and only place in which to seek to understand lived religion, which is the only sort of religion that exists.⁴ While this evolving relational world is also the world in which scholarly study of religion evolved, a particular historical moment has marked (perhaps even scarred) our discipline.

On (not) believing in belief

Bruno Latour asserts that "Belief is not a state of mind, but a result of the relationships between peoples; this has been known since Montaigne".⁵ He tries to persuade us to give up the "belief in belief" that is wrongly imputed to "religion" but does all too often define the study of religion. Malcolm Ruel made significant efforts to demonstrate that while "belief" is a central category within Christianity even Christians should not be categorised as "believers" but as people who do their religion.⁶ Yet we remain burdened by textbooks and research projects that privilege beliefs and believing both in relation to Christianity and all other religious phenomena. Genetic fallacies are certainly to be avoided, but some grasp of the historical processes by which "belief" was enthroned as a category can help us understand something about what empowers the "world religions paradigm" that still haunts scholarship about religion.

² G. HARVEY. *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*.

³ K. M. MORRISON. Animism and a proposal for a post-Cartesian anthropology.

⁴ L. N. PRIMIANO. Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular: Ambiguity, Power, and Creativity; M.B. McGuire. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*.

⁵ B. LATOUR. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*.

⁶ M. RUEL. *Belief, Ritual and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion*.

A long series of violent conflicts devastated early modern Europe. These are commonly identified as “Wars of Religion” because the combatants and victims can be identified as Roman Catholics and Protestants. These wars are said to have ended because political settlements established the principles of secular governance, including the eventual separation of “Church and State” in republican nations. However, William Cavanaugh⁷ and Richard King⁸ have offered powerful arguments that we should conceive of these wars differently. They were not “Wars of Religion” but “Wars of State-making”. The constitution of nation states required the re-formation of people with transnational allegiances (e.g. to Rome, Wittenberg or Geneva) into individual citizens. Religion was delegitimized as the generative organ of communal identities, loyalties or relationships and became instead a private and personal matter with no appropriate contact with the public affairs of states and their citizens. Evidence that “we have never been modern”, as Bruno Latour⁹ has asserted, might be found in diverse overt or subtle acts of resistance to these processes of privatisation, individualisation and interiorisation. Thus, when someone is accused of being a fundamentalist or extremist for making public religious statements, and especially when they enact religion in communal, corporate and perhaps violent ways, (whatever else they may be doing) they are challenging an early modern construction of religion. These and other tensions suggest that if “we have never been modern” considerable efforts continue to be made towards making everyone more modern. Religion is a particularly popular location for those efforts.

Academics who study religions regularly have largely failed to resist the seduction of polemics about religion as a private matter constructed as “believing”. Too many of our colleagues continue to seek the contours of Christian systematised beliefs in “other religions”. Even those who think they have jettisoned the “world religions paradigm” still shore up the notion that religious people engage in cognitive processes that are fundamentally alien to secular, public life. They do not ask “what do you eat?” but “what do you believe?”. They do not seek to explain the myriad food rules of religions but the alleged underlying ideas which experts can extract or extrapolate by observing religious people doing things like eating or not eating together. It is time to pay attention to taboo as a way of doing religion.

⁷ W.T. CAVANAUGH. *A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House*, pp.397-420.

⁸ R. KING. *The Association of ‘Religion’ with Violence: Reflections on a Modern Trope*.

⁹ B. LATOUR. *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Taboo

Some words which originated among indigenous peoples have been appropriated, adopted and/or adapted into the technical or critical vocabularies of ethnographic disciplines, including the study of religions. Examples include “shaman”, “totem” and “taboo”. The Polynesian word *taboo* entered the English language following its many uses in the record of Captain Cook’s Pacific voyages of 1769-79. For instance, Cook wrote,

When dinner was served, not one of them would even sit down, or eat a morsel of any thing, as they were all *taboo*, they said; which word, though it has a comprehensive meaning, generally signifies that a thing is prohibited.¹⁰

Cook also noted that his scientists were given a “potato field” adjoining a *morai* in which to erect their astronomical observatory (one purpose of these journeys being to observe planetary movements). He says that

to prevent the intrusion of the natives, the place was consecrated by the priests, by placing their wands around the walls which inclosed [sic] it. This interdiction the natives call *taboo*, a term frequently used by the islanders and seemed to be a word of extensive operation.¹¹

Food, people and places can be “tabooed”, restricted or set aside from ordinary use. Even in these first English uses of the term, Cook understood that the “comprehensive” meanings of *taboo* required translations as variable as “forbidden”, “interdicted”, “prohibited” and “consecrated”. “Taboo” seems such a useful word that it is hard to imagine how English-speakers spoke of relevant processes and activities prior to learning from those who returned from these Oceanic journeys. However, matters are complicated by the idea that “taboo” might be synonymous with words like “holy” or “sacred”. Or, rather, they are complicated by dualistic interpretations and uses of all these words.

Among Maori and other Polynesian peoples, taboo processes do not separate putatively “good” from putatively “bad” things, acts, places or people. More straightforwardly, taboo is about being clear and careful about differences until relationships can be normalised. New things are kept apart from familiar things for a more-or-less well defined time. Locals set up processes by which strangers can clarify whether they wish to become guests or enemies (or find other less polarised roles). The breathing and eating together of hosts and guests removes taboo and makes further intimacies and conversations possible. The plain fact of difference is vital until it ceases

¹⁰ J. COOK. *A journal of a voyage round the world in HMS Endeavour 1768-1771*. 3.1 p.129.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.157.

to be important. Difference places constraints, restraints and obligations on people until those differences are deemed uninteresting or are superseded by other important matters. Seen another way, difference is the cause of encounter and, if negotiated respectfully — “carefully” and “constructively” in Mary Black’s¹² gloss — it need not result in uniformity but in mutuality. Taboo is about negotiation and movement between relationships of difference and familiarity.

One value of exploring taboo in more depth (as I do elsewhere) is that it can enable us to improve our understanding of terms like “holy” and “sacred” (and their putative antonyms). Mary Douglas’s classic text *Purity and Danger*¹³ clarifies the logic of distinctions between “holy”, “clean” and “unclean” in biblical discourse and in Jewish *Kashrut* (the system of purity rules that organises observant Jewish life). The originating texts state unambiguously that sheep are “clean” or “normal” purely because they chew the cud and have cloven hooves. That other animals are declared “unclean” is not because they are soiled or unhygienic. Neither is it because they symbolise bad behaviour or might cause disease. It is certainly not the case that they are actually, physically inedible. The authors of these texts could have said such things if they had wished to. Instead they categorise some animals (those which chew the cud and have cloven hooves) to be different to others. In the final analysis, sheep are different because the system needs them to be different. In too many textbooks and discourses, “holy” or “sacred” seem to be static or fixed categories. But like taboo protocols, *Kashrut* is animated by negotiation and movement. Not all sheep are equal. They may be normal (or “clean”) for the most part but they can be made “holy” when offered (in the biblical period) to the deity sacrificially. If, however, a sheep destined for sacrifice should stumble and be injured en route to the temple, it immediately and automatically loses its “holiness” and becomes “unclean”. It cannot be given to the deity. Should it recover, after being returned to the flock, it could be eaten as a “clean” or normal animal. In these ways, the ritual positions and relations of sheep reveal the dynamism of processes that are not dissimilar from Polynesian taboo processes. We should conclude from this that the notions that “sacred” and “profane” identify strong separations requires re-examination. Similar separations of “sacred” from “secular” which affect rhetorics about religion in the contemporary world might require similar re-thinking.

In addition to improving our understanding of rather over-worked terms like “sacred” and “profane”, this section has indicated some ways in which food is central to religions. It is not only in sacrificial rituals that we recognise religion being performed. Neither is

¹² M.B.BLACK., “Ojibwa Power Belief System” in R. D. FOGELSON and R. N. ADAMS (eds), *The Anthropology of Power*. pp. 141-51.

¹³ M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

it only observable in the removal of animals from the food chain to be sacrificed (for other-than-practical reasons) to transcendent beings. These are undoubtedly religious acts. However, intimate, this-worldly and everyday activities like eating with other people are, at the very least, regulated by religious texts and authorities. Indeed, the furnishing of Jewish homes and the organisation of Jewish farming are religious concerns (both for the observant and for those who acknowledge their distance from traditional practices). Maori taboo protocols, especially of guest-making and of opening new meeting houses for speech-making, require the powerful normalising effectiveness of shared meals. Dramatic rituals and everyday food production and consumption are locations of religious activity.

A brief "panthropology" of taboo

The possibilities for re-imagining the locations and performances of religion is enriched when we find that humans are not unique in having food-related taboos. Among our close primate kin, chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) also mark cultural differences in "arbitrary, non-practical behaviours that assist to create some sort of random in-group/out-group identity (sometimes with violence)" (Volker Sommer, personal communication). Specifically, some groups of chimpanzees eat ants but not termites while others eat termites but not ants. They do not eat enough insects to gain much if any nutritional value or pleasure but invest considerable effort in crafting and manipulating the tools with which to obtain them. Speculating about why this might be the case raises the possibility that:

Gashaka chimpanzees do not consume termites because "it is not something that is done here" - similarly to the situation at Mahale / Tanzania, where termites are consumed in one community, but not the neighbouring... These patterns are perhaps related to what would be called a "food taboo" in human societies. For example, humans in the Gashaka area will not consider eating dogs, while this is perfectly acceptable for the same or similar ethnic groups just 1 ½ days walk away, across the border in Cameroon (I. Faucher pers. comm.). The non-consumption of a perfectly edible food-item would thus serve as some sort of group-identifying trait.¹⁴

Although these "panthropologists" are writing about present-day chimpanzees (i.e. those who, like us, have continued evolving physically and culturally over millennia), I feel encouraged to think that religion did not only evolve among humans. Possibly religious taboos and rituals began among the common ancestors of humans,

¹⁴ A. FOWLER, A. PASCUAL-GARRIDO, U. BUBA, S. TRANQUILLI, C. AKOSIM, C. SCHÖNING, and V. SOMMER. Panthropology of the fourth chimpanzee, p. 482.

chimpanzees and other primates. Steven Mithen offers a cogent argument for the origins of language and music in what he calls a “holistic manipulative multi-modal, musical and mimetic” (abbreviated to “hmmmmm”) communication system (partly originating among pre-human primates). When he discusses religion he asserts that “ideas about supernatural beings are the essence of religion”,¹⁵ thereby following a typically cognitivist rendition of Lutheran emphasis on “believing in god”. If, however, we follow less-supernaturalist and more relational and materialist approaches to religion¹⁶ we might find that religion has a closer fit with Mithen’s language and music proposals than he recognises. Imagining religion as a mode of interspecies interactivity or as the expression of respect between species may have required and enhanced the employment of “hmmmmm” communication. This is, of course, speculative. To return to more solid ground in which inter-species relations generate and require religion I turn now to a consideration of the purposes of ritual.

Ritual

The biblical sacrifices mentioned earlier involved humans in acts of violence against animals which they have tended with considerable care for some time. Hunting rites too implicate fraught human relationships with animals.¹⁷ Taboo protocols can be a means of contextualising such acts, encouraging deliberation and care about whether killing is necessary, and also building restraint into human consumption. Nonetheless, people have to eat, and eating requires killing, so it is possible that religion plays one or more roles in negotiating such facts of life.

One provocative definition of the “purpose of religious activity” is that of the Maori scholar Te Pakaka Tawhai. In relation to his people’s traditional knowledge he wrote that this purpose is

to seek to enter the domain of the superbeing and do violence with impunity: to enter the forest and do some milling for building purposes, to husband the plant and then to dig up the tubers to feed one’s guests. Thus that activity neither reaches for redemption and salvation, nor conveys messages of praise and thanksgiving, but seeks permission and offers placation.¹⁸

¹⁵ S. MITHEN, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*.

¹⁶ e.g. those of K. M. MORRISON. *Beyond the Supernatural: Language and Religious Action* and M. A. VÁSQUEZ. *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*.

¹⁷ R. WILLERSLEV. *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*.

¹⁸ T. P. TAWHAI. *Maori Religion*.

Tawhai's explanation of this passage relies on a number of facts. In order to feed guests, one must have planted, tended and harvested kumara, sweet potatoes. Over and above practical concerns about the conservation of plants for future planting, Tawhai's writing points to the structuring and maintenance of relations between humans and plants as much as between humans and other humans. Social life could not continue without the taking of life in order to produce food. But Tawhai describes a world in which 'social life' does not only include humans but embraces a larger-than-human community. There is nothing neutral about food and consumption: it is burdened with ethical and cultural weight.

As Aua, an Iglulik Inuit shaman, told Rasmussen, a Danish explorer and ethnographer, in the 1920s:

The greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All the creatures that we have to kill to eat, all those that we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, like we have, souls that do not perish with the body and which must therefore be propitiated lest they should avenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies.¹⁹

Regardless of whether "souls" exist, our relationships with other animals are fraught both because of their similarities with and differences from us and also because we (and probably they) do not entirely approve of violence and life-taking. Nonetheless, killing is a necessary stage in consumption and therefore of living. Local context (i.e. adaptation to arctic conditions) underpins Aua's emphasis on human kinship with animals. Tawhai's evocation of the husbanding of sweet potatoes widens this concern with killing others to include plants. Inuit and Maori are far from alone in seeking ways to commit necessary, life-sustaining violence with impunity but should serve as sufficient examples of cultured responses to the problem. Short phrases abstracted from their statements ("doing violence with impunity" and "human food consists entirely of souls") could incite greater efforts to understand the ways in which food and religion interrelate.

Another wider cycle of human violence is foundational to the current global ecological crisis and to the understanding that our impact on the world is now so dramatically formative that it deserves the geological label "anthropocene era". While many religious communities have framed and promulgated declarations and manifestos about this, arguably a more truly "religious" response and/or activism is to be seen in rituals. Although Ronald Grimes²⁰ expresses doubts that many "people consider rites an effective means for saving the planet from environmental destruction", he also

¹⁹ K. RASMUSSEN. *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. pp 55-56.

²⁰ R. GRIMES. *Ritual Theory and the Environment*.

generates a profound hope that religious people will recognise the value of doing ritual in order to rejoin “the deep world’s gift economy”²¹. This hope encourages him to try to inspire and cajole readers into going out and performing rites to attract other-than-human beings to work with humans in doing something about the state of the world. Regardless of whether some colleagues might find the construction of ritual performances too activist to be fit within the tenor of scholarly objectivity, I celebrate it as a testing of possibilities. That is, both the possibilities of understanding ritual and the crucial possibility that ritual might be a valuable technique for solving problems are admirably tested by scholars with expert ritual knowledge actually doing ritual.

Food and a relational approach to religion

Why is it difficult to ask “what do you eat?” as our first question about religion? The lineage of the scholarly study of religions goes back to entangled roots in Christian theology and secularising modernity. The one traditionally sought to correct wrong believing, the other to challenge the irrationality of any believing. Neither paid much attention to eating. Perhaps official ceremonies involving metaphysics (especially the Christian Eucharist) invited discussion of how people should or could believe such things. Little attention was paid to the social and gendered processes by which, for example, Eucharistic bread was made and distributed or disposed of (the latter in traditions in which priests do not consume anything left over). Much has changed as scholars have realised that “lived religion” is the thing to study. Exemplary texts²² are demonstrating the value of focusing on foodways as an unrivalled approach to understanding how religion is lived or performed. Nonetheless, it remains possible to treat foodways as merely illustrating the expression or manifestation of beliefs or as colourful descriptive entrées to the main business of studying beliefs. Theorisation of religion as foodways is in its infancy but has a promising career ahead of it. We might, for instance, ponder the value of defining religions as disciplines. Taboos and fasts not only demonstrate the importance of restraint in bodily or earthly matters but indicate something about the disciplinary regimes that structure both the institutions and “spiritual practices” of religions. Festive foods and culinary traditions can play more important roles in scholarly discussions of religion when they are recognised as the engines of the social relations that are religion. That is, to be clear, religion should not be thought of as a mask worn by “society”, reifying its power structures or authorising its hierarchies. Rather, religion is socialising or relating. Relational approaches attend to the doing of religion within this Darwinian, evolving world of multi-species kin. At

²¹ R. GRIMES. Performance Is Currency in the Deep World’s Gift Economy.

²² B. E. ZELLER, et. alii. (eds). *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*.

their most radical, they might even require us to change the question “what do you eat?” into the more radical question “who do you eat?”. This would expand our discussions of religion and foodways into something more central to the understanding of the world. Whether or not you are persuaded by that idea, religious taboos and rituals are about what (who) gets eaten by whom and with whom. Seemingly random rules and abstractions become meaningful when considered with reference to the interactions between religious people around foodways.

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