

On Food and Religion: An Introduction

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It is a well-known fact that besides having an indispensable nutritional function, food also has an important cultural value. Methods to transform and make use of food have their origins in social contexts and contribute to generating cultural processes and forms of life. According to this view, food is also a cultural invention which has come to influence man's ways of being and living, as well as the manner in which man relates to others, the world and the divine.

Food and its production, cooking methods and consumption practices can be considered on a hermeneutic-interpretative level for possessing a strong symbolic and, therefore, semantic value. In order to fully understand their historical, cultural and social dimensions, from which the symbolic becomes operational, it is necessary to conduct a careful interpretation to reveal those meanings forgotten by the very cultural traditions that produced them. This interpretative work is of direct interest to philosophical reflection as it raises questions concerning the human condition, the individual, social and community life of man and, in general, his being-in-the-world.

It is evident from the articles presented here that over the millennia man has established an intimate connection between his forms of life with food and its cultural productions. In different societies, food takes on multiple meanings that bind and commit people to living

and behaving in certain individual and community ways. In the great cultural traditions, different semantic dimensions are reflected to the point of blending into the life forms of peoples.

The cultural tradition of a community makes food, with its rules of transformation of preparation, consumption and its prohibitions and taboos, a fundamental trait of collective identity. In the article entitled Religioni e cibo: le prescrizioni alimentari di tipo religioso come mezzo di definizione identitaria (Religions and Food: Religious Food Rules as a Means of Identity Definition), Cristiano Marasca opens us up to the different interpretations of the meanings of food that we can find in Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Reviewing the studies of various anthropologists, he points out that food also performs an important identity function: "Human beings bind themselves to their religious group through food-related patterns, and religious rules concerning food are often used as a means of safeguarding cultural identity". Moreover, in different cultural traditions, food possesses a powerful semiotic capacity and performs functions of exclusion, rivalry, distance, community and belonging. As Lévi-Strauss points out, a society expresses a language from which it unconsciously allows its contradictions to emerge. It is thus that "food rules and taboos could be seen as a semiotic device carrying specific cultural meanings and identity markers that demarcate the boundaries between endogroup and exogroup".

In the interview with Master Swami Joythimayananda, themes emerge concerning the meanings and values of food and fasting in the complex field of Ayurvedic medicine. The Master emphasises that food, as well as fasting, are fundamental to the spiritual path. In this sense, nutrition is an integral part of Ayurvedic medicine as it concerns not only the body, but also the mind and soul. «In order to balance the functioning of body, mind and soul, we have to take good care of our nutrition». The choice of food, its preparation, and its consumption are

all part of a spiritual way of life that aims to be in harmony with the environment and the Whole.

Rosaria Cavalieri, with her article entitled L'esperienza del gustare tra corpo e mente, soggettività e oggettività (The Experience of Tasting between Body and Mind, Subjectivity and Objectivity), offers us, instead, a careful reflection on the food-taste-cognition relationship. Through her arguments, going against the philosophical prejudice regarding the unreliability of taste for cognitive purposes, the author intends to show that food and taste are issues that philosophical thought should re-evaluate, reconsider and deepen. In fact, dealing with sensoriality and thus with a sense such as taste is important for many reasons concerning knowledge. This is because through the analysis of sensoriality it is possible to grasp the intricate connections that are established in humans between bodily experience, cognition and subjectivity. Eating and tasting have to do with complex emotional, sentimental, cognitive dynamics so that they constitute an opening to the world that passes through our perceptions and our "being body". Enjoying food is not only a multisensory experience but also an emotional and cognitive one. Tasting, then, "is a form of embodied knowledge". Taste constitutes a form of 'bodily intelligence' that contributes on a cognitive level to help us grasp distinctions, nuances and discernment.

The multiple meanings that man has attached to food, its processing and consumption, closely touch man's being-in-the-world. They raise questions concerning man's individual and collective life together with his cultural productions that cannot leave philosophical thought indifferent.

