

Religion and Food

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Why does food play such a big part in so many sacred traditions? How do people use food to make sense of the world? Why do we fast, kill animals, feed spirits, and throw potluck suppers in the name of religion?

This course will introduce students to the study of religion, using food as an entry point. Through readings, lectures, slides, videos, and hands-on experiences, we will investigate case studies from many cultures and historical periods. We will explore aspects of foodways such as cooking, farming, sacrifice, aesthetics, and display as they relate to myth, magic, ritual, healing, ethics, and doctrine. This class will challenge participants will be challenged to move beyond easy notions of culture, religious authority, identity and doctrine. Students will be expected to keep up with an intensive but interesting schedule of reading, to participate in class discussions and activities, and to complete written assignments including responses, several mini-projects, and a final library or field project on a topic of their choice.

Requirements

The course includes a fairly intensive schedule of readings. Students will be expected to stay up-to-date on the works covered, to come to class prepared for active discussion, and to play a part in shaping the flow of the course. Readings are due on the day they are listed.

All class members will write responses to the readings. Responses may be in the form of 1-2 page papers submitted to the instructor, or they can be 2-3 paragraph postings to the class website (at www.nicenet.org - the code for registration will be given out in class). You are required to submit 7 responses (any additional responses will be considered for extra credit). See the Nicenet site for more details on assignments.

In addition to the readings and responses, there will be three short exercises and a final project. The exercises will generally be announced a week or two in advance, and will vary in format. Students should expect to spend several hours per week on reading and preparation of responses and/or short exercises.

By the end of the fourth week, each student will be expected to work out a written agreement on project expectations with the instructor, either in person or via e-mail. The agreement will provide the standard by which your project will be graded, and may be modified in the course of the semester by mutual agreement of the student and the instructor. By the first session after Fall Break, you will need to turn in either a 5-source (minimum) annotated bibliography, an indexed interview tape (at least 20 minutes), or detailed visual documentation of material folklore or events at the core of your project. The final project will be due by November 28. It will be in the neighborhood of 10-12 pages, depending on the agreed-upon format.

Texts

[Required articles](#) (listed as "R" below) will be placed on reserve

- *The Rituals of Dinner*, by Margaret Visser
- *Food and Culture*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (listed as F&C below)
- *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, by Caroline Walker Bynum

- *Clambake*, by Kathy Neustadt
- *The Lord's Table*, by Gillian Feeley-Harnik
- *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (optional)

Week one - Appetizers

[9/7] Introductions, syllabus, readings.

Week two - Thinking about Food and Religion

- o [9/12] Read: Barthes (in F&C), Jones "Afterword", Camp (both R)
- o [9/14] Read: Durkheim, Geertz, Harris "Why We Became Religious", Primiano, Frazer (all R)

Week three - Foodways as Ritual

- o [9/19] Read: Visser
- o [9/21] Read: Visser, cont.

Week four - Thought and Aesthetics

- o [9/26] Read: Lévi-Strauss - "The Culinary Triangle", Douglas (F&C)
- o [9/28] Project Agreement Due. Read: Lévi-Strauss - "Towards Harmony", Jones "The Proof..." (both R)

Week five - The Origins of Food

- o [10/3] Exercise 1 due. Read: Myths (to be announced)
- o [10/5] Read: Lloyd, Yoder, Núñez (both R)

Week six - Cooking and Presentation

- o [10/10] Read: Van Esterik, Zumwalt (both R)
- o [10/12] Read: Jamzadeh and Mills, dasa, Seriff and Turner (all R)

Week seven - Community

- o [10/24] Read: Neustadt

Week eight - Differentiation

- o [10/31] Project Materials Due. Read: Georges, Montaña, Baer (all R)
- o [11/2] Read: Meigs, Harris (F&C), Nichter (R)

Week nine - Differentiation (continued), Transitions

- o [11/7] Exercise 2 due. Read: Feeley-Harnik
- o [11/9] Read: Brown, Shuldner, Spear (all R)

Week ten - The Body

- o [11/14] Read: Bynum (through p. 186)
- o [11/16] Read: rest of Bynum

Week eleven - Healing

- o [11/21] Read: O'Connor, BeDuhn (both R), Anderson (F&C)

Week twelve - Beings Without Bodies

- o [11/28] Final Project Due.
- o [11/30] Read: LaFleur, Lopez (both R), Shack (F&C)

Week thirteen - Magic and Morality

- o [12/5] Read: Munn, Tucker, Bringéus (both R)

o [12/7] Read: Tricycle debate, Cosman (both R)

Week fourteen - Religion in the Commercial and Secular

o [12/12] Exercise 3 due. Read: Siporin, Zelinsky, Waldenberger (all R), Mintz (F&C)

o [12/14] Final Thoughts. Read: Kottak (R), Allison (F&C)

Articles

Michael Owen Jones - "Afterword" (from We Gather Together)

Charles Camp - "The Food Event" (from American Foodways)

Emile Durkheim - excerpt from Elementary Forms of the Religious Life

Clifford Geertz - "Religion as a Cultural System"

Marvin Harris - "Why We Became Religious"

Leonard Primiano - "Vernacular Religion"

J.G. Frazer - "Sympathetic Magic"

Claude Levi-Strauss - "The Culinary triangle"

Mary Douglas - "Deciphering a Meal"

Claude Levi-Strauss - "Towards Harmony" (from From Honey to Ashes)

Michael Owen Jones - "The Proof is in The Pudding: The Role of Sensation in Food Choice as Revealed by Sensory Deprivation"

Timothy Lloyd - "Folklore, Foodways, and the Supernatural"

Don Yoder - "Harvest Home"

Luiz Manuel Nunez / Michael Ventura - "Santeria and the Idea of Sacrifice / Sacrifice"

Penny Van Esterik - "Feeding Their Faith: Recipe Knowledge among Thai Buddhist Women"

Rosemary Levy Zumwalt - "The Point Hope Whale Festival"

Laal Jamzadeh and Margaret Mills - "Iranian Sofreh"

Adiraja dasa - excerpt from "The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking"

Suzanne Serriff and Kay Turner - "Giving an Altar to St. Joseph"

Robert Georges - "You Often Eat What Others Think You Are"

Mario Montano - "Appropriation and Counterhegemony in South Texas"

Anna Meigs - "Food as a Cultural Construction"

Marvin Harris - "The Abominable Pig"

Karen McCarthy Brown - "Staying Grounded in a High-Rise Building"

David Shuldner - "The Celebration of Passover Among Jewish Radicals"

Sonya Spear - unpublished paper examining recent Christian Seder meals from a Jewish perspective.

Bonnie Blair O'Connor - "Defining and Understanding Health Belief Systems"

Jason BeDuhn - "A Regimen for Salvation"

E. N. Anderson - "Traditional Medical Values of Food"

William LaFleur - "Hungry Ghosts and Hungry People"

Donald Lopez - "Exorcising Demons with a Buddhist Sutra"

Henry Munn - "The Mushrooms of Language"

Elizabeth Tucker - "The Seven-Day Wonder Diet"

Tricycle Magazine - debate on meat eating and Buddhist practice

Madeleine Perner Cosman - "Sex, Smut, Sin, and Spirit"

Steve Siporin - "From Kashrut to Cucina Ebraica"

Wilbur Zelinsky - "The Roving Palate"

Suzanne Waldenberger - unpublished paper on the Bible in food and diet marketing

Sidney Mintz - "Time, Sugar, and Sweetness"

Conrad Kottak - "Ritual at McDonald's"

Anne Allison - "Japanese Mothers and Obentos"

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