

Totem and taboo in the grocery store

Quasi-religious foodways in North America

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This article considers food proscriptions such as veganism and gluten-free eating, and prescriptions such as the Paleolithic diet, focusing on the North American context. These quasi-religious foodways serve as means for individuals to engage in discourses of community, personal and group identity, and boundary-marking. Through the daily practice of eating, those who follow quasi-religious foodways mark their identities, literally consuming who they are. These quasi-religious foodways therefore function to allow contemporary consumer-oriented individualistic Americans to engage in discourses of community, identity, and meaning in a highly vernacular manner, that of the marketplace. They also point to the manner in which identity and community have expanded well outside of religious categories.

A court case over whether veganism is a religion; a confectionary where the owner refers to wheat gluten as a taboo; a lifestyle modelling the imagined foodways and folkways of Paleolithic hominids. These intersections between *religion*, *food*, and *culture* demand attention, if only because they blur the borders between those three categories. As I will argue here, each of these 'quasi-religious' foodways represents a manner in which individuals living in consumer-oriented late modernity have crafted meaningful identities and social worlds with reference to absolute and transcendent meanings. These quasi-religious approaches to food function akin to traditional religions, mooring practitioners in identities and communities, and replicating the senses of comfort that religions traditionally provide.

There are many ways of studying religion and food. Every religious tradition involves rituals, ceremonies, or everyday practices involving food, eating, and drinking. Most religions offer guidelines on what sort of foods one ought or ought not to eat at particular times, amongst particular people, or in particular places. Further, practitioners of nearly every religion engage in lived practices involving food (Zeller 2012). Each of these represent important areas that we collectively as scholars ought to consider in our study of religion and food.

Much of the research on religion and food has focused on proscriptions and prescriptions of particular foods. The anthropologist Mary Douglas first raised the issue of food proscription or taboo as a fundamental concept in the analysis of culture in her *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), whilst the medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (1987) was one of the first academic monograph-length treatments of food proscription in the most general sense, focusing on fasting and its complex relation to the Eucharist in the lives of religious women in the Middle Ages. Looking at books in the more popular vein and with a more explicit treatment of both proscription and prescription, the anthropologist Marvin Harris's *The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig* (1985) traced for a broader audience how and why specific religious groups avoided particular foods, or especially consumed other ones. In the decades that followed the publication of these books academics have looked to such themes in a multitude of religions. While certainly scholars have researched other areas in the intersection of religion and food, studies of proscriptions and prescriptions have become most common.

Looking at this topic alone, one finds that most of the research on religion and food has focused on practices within traditionally defined religious communities. David M. Freidenreich's recent *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (2011) provides an apt example of cutting-edge contemporary scholarship on this topic, since Freidenreich not only explores the various ways that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic food codes have developed, but how they have functioned within particular religious contexts to define and maintain religious boundaries. Most of the chapters in my own anthology, *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, look to such proscriptions and prescriptions within particular religious contexts, with contributors arguing that these food codes serve to help individuals negotiate identities and define communities of practice and belief (Zeller *et al.* 2014). These range from Santería practitioners in colonial Cuba, to Muslims concerned about the intersection of sustainability and *halal* in contemporary Chicago. Yet generally scholars have focused on proscriptions and prescriptions within well-delineated groups that one would traditionally define as traditional 'religions': Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more recently new religious movements or sectarian groups branching off those traditions.

I want to broaden that focus quite explicitly, looking to religious or quasi-religious prescriptions and proscriptions outside the boundaries of traditional religions, linking them explicitly to the sort of religious food regulations and practices that we more traditionally study. This article focuses on food proscriptions such as veganism and gluten-free eating, and prescriptions such as

the Paleolithic diet, within the North American context. I call these quasi-religious foodways, and focus on them for two reasons. First, it challenges us to reconsider what we mean by ‘religion’, in a similar vein to the work of Russell McCutcheon, Craig Martin, and other theorists who insist that ‘religion’ is a constructed category rather than a *sui generis* one (McCutcheon 2003, Martin 2010). Second, particularly in North America, such quasi-religious relationships with food seem to be on the rise. These quasi-religious foodways include not only those already mentioned, but vegetarianism, locavorism, raw foodism, organic-only diets, and cleanse or detox food practices. All of these, in my reading, can represent quasi-religious relationships with food because they instil food and eating with transcendent qualities and meanings, foster personally meaningful worldviews for practitioners, develop ritualizations and other practices, and serve to develop communities of practice. Further, these quasi-religious foodways function as means for individuals to engage in discourses of community, personal and group identity, and boundary-marking. Through the daily practice of eating, those who follow quasi-religious as well as more traditionally-religious foodways mark their identities, literally consuming who they are.

Foodways as religions

In 2002, the State of California Court of Appeals rendered a verdict in an unusual case, *Friedman v. Southern California Permanente Medical Group*. Jerold Friedman, an office worker, had been offered a job by a medical services company contingent on Mr Friedman’s having received routine childhood and adult vaccinations. This requirement is quite common in the medical field, given fears of infecting immune-compromised patients. Yet Mr Friedman refused to receive the mumps vaccine, citing his strict veganism and the fact that the vaccine is produced using embryonic chicken matter. The medical services company rescinded the job offer, and Mr Friedman sued, alleging religious discrimination.

Friedman argued that veganism was his religion. To support this claim, he insisted that veganism ‘guides the way that he lives his life’. He called veganism ‘spiritual in nature and set[ting] a course for his entire way of life’. Friedman argued that he would allow harm to come to himself rather than violate his vegan beliefs, that he upheld his veganism as strongly as did proponents of more traditional religions, and that his vegan beliefs were ‘sincere and meaningful’. He declared that veganism determined how he ate, dressed, with whom he spent time, and his political views. He noted that he had even been arrested for

civil disobedience in support of his veganism (*Friedman v. Southern California Permanente/Kaiser Foundation Hospitals* 2000).

All that being said, Friedman lost his initial case. He appealed to the state's high court, which after exhaustive study of federal and state decisions on religious freedom, sought to apply American jurisprudence to the question of whether veganism constitutes a religion. On behalf of the three-judge appeal panel, State Appellate Judge Paul Turner issued his judgment that veganism was not, in fact, a religion. Turner's logic was simple. Based on various other court cases, he defined religion as 'address[ing] fundamental and ultimate questions having to do with deep and imponderable matters, ... [being] comprehensive in nature, ... [and possessing] certain formal and external signs' (*Friedman v. Southern California Permanente Medical Group* 2002). Writing for the court, Turner reasoned:

There is no claim that veganism speaks to: the meaning of human existence; the purpose of life; theories of humankind's nature or its place in the universe; matters of human life and death; or the exercise of faith. ... Plaintiff does not assert that his belief system derives from a power or being or faith to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else depends ... there are no: teachers or leaders; services or ceremonies; structure or organization; orders of worship or articles of faith; or holidays. (*Friedman v. Southern California Permanente Medical Group* 2002)

Friedman failed because his veganism did not look similar enough to the normative Protestantism – or, charitably, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, to borrow Will Herberg's formulation (1955) – that defines the American religious milieu. Veganism lacks clergy, churches, revealed texts, and an overarching or totalistic ideology. Given Protestantism as the basis of American religious norms, then if one defines religion as Turner did in his legal decision, veganism is no religion.

However, that is not the only way to define religion. Other legal thinkers and different judicial jurisdictions have come to the opposite conclusion, and have sometimes protected vegan practitioners on the basis of religious belief (Page 2005). Among scholars of religion, functionalists – and I count myself among them – focus on what religion does, how, and why, with an eye towards how people practice it and what it looks like when it is performed. Under these rubrics, veganism with its codes and communities of practice developed under a systematic set of beliefs about absolute values looks quite a bit like a religion. Recall that Friedman's veganism 'guid[ed] the way that he lives his life', which

meant in his case that he based decisions about health, political activities, and his social life on his veganism. His veganism forced him to take a conscientious position that resulted in his inability to assume a job on the terms he had been offered. He even called his veganism ‘spiritual in nature’, and if one follows the general logic of how Americans use the term, ‘spiritual’ simply means religious in an individualistic, non-institutional form (Fuller 2001). Veganism, in appealing to those who claim such a mantle, functions as an individualistic quasi-religion that nevertheless offers value and meaning to its practitioners, akin to how traditional religions do. Veganism merely does so for individualistic, secularized, this-worldly Americans.

Friedman was not alone in identifying his veganism as something akin to religion. In an oral history study of vegans that I produced, I found that the majority of practising vegans lived their foodways in a manner generally paralleling religion, and many like Friedman explicitly identified their veganism as a spirituality or individualized religion (Zeller 2014). My study indicated that the majority of vegans adopted their foodways after a process closely paralleling a religious conversion. Most had experienced conversions akin to the classic Christian case of the Apostle Paul wherein they felt an immediate impetus to convert after a radical experience of disjuncture, ranging from reading about the meat industry to visiting a commercial slaughter operation. A minority described a conversion process more akin to what one finds today in the New Age movement, involving intensive searching, exploration, and a more active experience of choosing veganism. Regardless, the individuals I studied reported that their veganism provided them with not only new practices related to eating, but also new codes of ethics and morality with reference to absolute good and evil, texts to study and with which to guide their lives, communities of fellow practitioners, and a new sense of identity. ‘This is me. It is about purity. ... It’s kind of a religion thing’, explained one of my subjects. (Zeller 2009)

Whether veganism is a ‘real’ religion is too broad a question to fully consider here. I use the term ‘quasi-religion’ as a compromise, since veganism at least shares some of the generally agreed-upon characteristics of religions. Vegans themselves seem quite aware of the correspondences and resonances between veganism and religion. Perhaps most notable is the use of Christian and at times Jewish imagery by the largest international vegan movement, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

PETA’s willingness to court controversy is well attested, and they embrace public disobedience and street protests not only to convey their argument against the consumption of animals, but also to gain attention. Religious spectacle is one of PETA’s common techniques, and while one might argue

that there is nothing intrinsically ‘religious’ about PETA, the group exploits the iconography of religion expertly. PETA activists have staged mock crucifixions, produced advertisements juxtaposing vegan placards with bibles, and issued calls for nuns to ‘convert’ to veganism: all indicating that indeed the line between veganism and religion is hazy, if present at all (WND 2006, PETA 2011, 2010). PETA’s spokesman Bruce Friedrich told one reporter, in response to criticisms of PETA’s mock crucifixions of animals held in Vienna and Berlin during the Christian Holy Week in 2006, that ‘[w]hat is offensive to God is the satanic treatment of God’s creatures by factory farms and slaughterhouses. ... We attempt to raise anyone’s awareness that eating meat is a violation of all religions, the spirit of compassion that infuses all religions. ... As a Roman Catholic myself, what I find offensive is that Christians would deny God’s creatures their every desire and need and cause them to suffer’ (WND 2006). Critics in turn assail PETA’s ‘gospel’, ‘evangelism’, and ‘religion’, indicating that at the very least this vegan movement has been successful in redefining itself as something akin to religion. Christian capitalist groups and Christian groups with ties to industrial farming explicitly engage PETA as a fellow religion, albeit one with which they disagree. ‘Marketplace Ministries’, a right-leaning Christian capitalist group, assailed ‘the gospel of PETA’ as ‘based on a set of beliefs which becomes a religion for those who are believers’ (Davis 2008). Similarly, the Center for Consumer Freedom, a Christian group associated with the gambling, tobacco, and fast food industries, have produced a booklet with faux-bible design accusing PETA of ‘twisting religion’ to support veganism (Martosko 2005). Certainly veganism looks ‘religious’ to at least some Christian opponents.

I would go further than this: vegans use ideas about the nature of evil, the world, and the human condition to craft a worldview that focuses on explicit practices about how to live one’s life on individual and social levels. This makes it a religion, if not a quasi-religion. The sociologist Malcom Hamilton writes that veganism and its related foodway vegetarianism possess ‘a number of “quasi-religious” themes, including taboo and avoidance behaviour, reverence for life, the denial of death, reincarnation, observance of disciplines and the rejection of domination and oppression’ (2000: 65). Such themes, he argues, represent the way in which vegans or vegetarians ‘seek to address those aspects of life ... which religion has traditionally addressed’ (*ibid.* 65). Hamilton is quite correct; veganism certainly functions in this way. Yet veganism functions as a religion or quasi-religion in a manner highly distinctive of capitalist late modernity: through consumption. Vegans obtain moral and spiritual certainty through what they eat and do not eat, marking veganism as a highly immanentist religion. Eschewing supernaturalism and transcendent notions of the divine – both

hallmarks of traditional religions – vegans root their practices in a this-worldly philosophy and set of practices. In this way, veganism fits well within the worldview of the secularized West, and it finds it appeals primarily among the most secular of North Americans. However, their this-worldliness leads vegans to sow the seeds of their own inability to convince the broader public of the religious nature of their practices. By seeming so unlike traditional religions on a theological level, observers and even legal decision-makers such as California's Justice Turner fail to recognize the intrinsically religious practices of vegans.

Totem and taboo

All this may seem quite interesting, but beyond questions of jurisprudence and curiosity, so what? Why does it matter that veganism – or for that matter any other alternative foodway – seems akin to religion? As I read it, what a person chooses to eat or not eat in our contemporary culture acts as a powerful social and psychological signifier of identity, community, and worldview. Food and foodways become *totems* and *taboos*, to use Sigmund Freud's language, which individuals use to navigate the anxieties of modern life, and craft identities within it. Importantly, they do so in a manner uniting consumption, immanence, and a highly individualized and secularized notion of the self, spiritual practice, and community.

In his famous comparative study of mental health and pre-modern culture, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1913) developed a model of how the concepts of totem and taboo served as key models around which early religion developed. The totem, wrote Freud, 'stands in a special relation to the whole clan' (1913: 2, my translation). It binds the group together. The totem food represents and crystallizes the community of practitioners of the alternative foodways, whether they be vegans, gluten-free eaters, or Paleolithic eaters. While my usage of totem follows Freud here, I depart from him in an important regard. Freud wrote that groups do not consume the totem, given its degree of sacredness. I turn that on its head in my neo-Freudian interpretation: totem foods are defined by being eaten, and eaten with relish (so to speak!). Local food is totem for locavores; vegetables for vegans; gluten-free cookies for gluten-free lifestyle adherents; free-range meat for Paleolithic eaters. Freud's and my approach to the *totem* parallels that of Durkheim, though Freud proceeds from the level of the analysis of the individual rather than the collective. Yet for both Freud and Durkheim, and for me, the totem serves as central symbol of identity and community, and a special sort of symbol since it is invoked through religious practice.

Freud defined taboo as ‘possessing the meaning, on the one hand: holy [*heilig*], consecrated [*geweiht*]; on the other: eerie [*unheimlich*], dangerous [*gefährlich*], forbidden [*verboten*], impure [*unrein*] ... the taboo expressed itself importantly in prohibitions [*Verboten*] and restrictions [*Einschränkungen*]’ (1913: 25, my translation). The usefulness in Freud’s conceptualization is that the concept highlights both the forbidden nature of the taboo as well as the fact that it is somehow marked as special. The taboo is set apart as especially rejected and marked as uniquely wrong. Again, one might compare this to Durkheim’s idea of the sacred, though that is not really what either Freud or I have in mind. The taboo food is one that is forbidden in an especially significant way, one that leads practitioners to invest this avoidance with meaning and relevance, and to form a community of practice around it. Gluten obviously functions as a taboo for those attracted to the gluten-free lifestyle, just as animal products do for vegans, and the ‘foods of civilization’ for Paleolithic dieters. (Of note, I am omitting there those who avoid those foods for purely medical reasons, a matter to which I shall return.)

I do not mean to argue that people have never been gluten-intolerant or chosen to eat vegan diets, nor that everyone who avoids gluten or meat is engaged in a quasi-religious form of eating. Yet the creation of *veganism*, and a gluten-free *subculture* reflect the way in which these totem and taboo foodways function quite differently than purely nutrition- or health-based personal food choices either contemporary or historic. They become emblems of identity within broader cultural movements. They link a practitioner to practices, discourses, texts, and groups centred around avoiding or consuming the same foods. They provide meaning and certainty in a world of food choices. They resolve, in Michael Pollan’s (2006) words, the ‘omnivore’s dilemma’ so present in the global food economy dominated by apparent abundance and choice, but a reality of mass-produced synthetic food. These food taboos and totems serve to invest the quotidian act of eating with absolute significance.

As noted, they do this in a manner befitting early twenty-first century capitalist culture: through consumption. Practitioners of totemic quasi-religions mark identities through what they eat and do not eat. Here one can glimpse the manner in which identity and the spiritual practices constructing and supporting it have become both secularized and individualized. The sociologist Mark Chaves (2011: 41) explains that such growing individualism represents ‘one aspect of Americans’ overall softening involvement in traditional religion, and as part and parcel of a growing skepticism in American society about the value of organizations and institutions in many spheres of life, including religion.’ While individual, these alternative foodways are also secularized, for while

they may function akin to religion, they claim a this-worldly immanentism and eschew the sort of totalistic theology typical of most religions. Quasi-religious foodways exemplify this trend, revealing the way in which individualization, secularization, and consumption unite to create a context where what one eats or does not eat becomes a manner of emblemizing identity.

The gluten-free foodway and totem

If one enters the terms ‘taboo+gluten’ into a web search engine (the ‘+’ means both terms must appear on the same webpage) one will find 11 million hits. Contrast that to about 1.7 million hits for ‘taboo+beef’ and 1 million hits for ‘taboo+pork’. If you follow a few hundred of these webpages discussing gluten as a taboo you will find that the vast majority use the term ‘taboo’ as a synonym for ‘forbidden’, ‘unacceptable’, or even ‘wrong’. Most such pages are produced by bloggers, journalists, nutritionists, and diet aid companies and offer proscriptive advice as to how to avoid gluten and gluten-related products, and conversely prescriptive advice for alternatives, ranging from quinoa cookies to rice meal bread. One does not want to build an academic analysis based solely on the terms used by practitioners, but it does seem that eleven million emic assessments ought to at least influence any etic one!

I encountered gluten as taboo when I wandered into a new confectionary near where I live in suburban Chicago in spring 2014. I was attracted by the beautifully formed and coloured macarons, *petits fours*, cannolis, and cookies lined up in the window. I chatted amicably with the owner briefly about my love of European pastries until he abruptly asked me if I knew what sort of confectionary I was in. The tone of the question implied sectarianism, esotericism, even transgression, as if I had wandered into a secret society, or perhaps a drag club. ‘This is a gluten-free bakery’, the owner revealed. He explained over the ensuing conversation how he was able to create gustatory delights without use of what he explicitly called a ‘taboo’, namely gluten, making special point to explain that customers who ate his products were assured of health and wellness. In the words emblazoned on the menu, the bakery offers ‘organic, preservative-free, GMO-free, trans-fat free, peanut-free, gluten-free and allergy-friendly products to help you live a healthy lifestyle’ (Rose’s Café and Bakery 2014). I was being sold, in essence, not only food but a lifestyle. It occurred to me as I walked away that in this confectionary, gluten was not only a taboo, but that gluten-free was a totem. The confectionary did not offer gluten-free food only to the minute number of Americans with serious medical conditions preventing them from being able to digest gluten, it offered gluten-free as a totem designed to provide health, holism, and satisfaction.

Gluten, a protein found in wheat and related grains that can transform a mushy mass of carbohydrates into stringy, cohesive bread, has become both totem and taboo within the realm of foodie discourse. Scientific studies estimate that one per cent of Americans suffer an allergic reaction to gluten, that is to say coeliac disease, yet recent surveys show that between 18 and 30 per cent of Americans have experimented with or adopted a gluten-free diet, with similar numbers in Canada (Fasano *et al.* 2003, NPD Group 2013, Market Research Group 2013). No data shows the exact number who follow a strict gluten-free diet, but for these individuals – a truly massive number of Americans – gluten has become a powerful taboo that they use to create meaning in their food and lifestyle choices, and even worldview. By contrast, other North American food aficionados and epicures have embraced fads such as artisanal cupcakes, hearth-baked bread, and donuts that emblemize gluten in its most obvious forms.

In a recent opinion piece the *New York Times* columnist Jessica Bruder reminisced about a dinner party where she had served a loaf of bread stuffed with savoury Italian cheeses. ‘The kitchen went quiet. You’d think I had offered up a bouquet of poison ivy’, she writes. Based on the behaviour of her guests and others like them who adopt restrictive diets ranging from gluten-free to vegan to macrobiotic to local, Bruder (2012) concludes that ‘many contemporary eating styles speak directly to values and virtues, aiming to affirm your ethos rather than nuking your love handles. ... Consumers seem to be building self through sustenance, ... control and identity were two common themes on everyone’s lips.’ Bruder is absolutely correct to note that these two themes, control and identity, categorize how individuals relate to totemic or taboo foods within quasi-religious foodways. They do so, as Bruder aptly notes, through consumption.

Evidence of how and why individuals craft their identities around such foodways as gluten-free eating is admittedly anecdotal, as no detailed social science survey or oral history study has yet been performed. Interviews with celebrities who have embraced such diets shed some light. Most emphasize that gluten-free eating leads to holistic well-being and a sense of authenticity. Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, and Gwyneth Paltrow all publicly made such claims, indicating that gluten-free was simply who they were (Piccalo 2010). Cyrus took to twitter to make her position clear: ‘For everyone calling me anorexic, I have a gluten and lactose allergy. It’s not about weight it’s about health. Gluten is cr*pppp anyway! ... Everyone should try no gluten for a week. The change in your skin, physical and mental health is amazing’ (Eglash 2013). Elisabeth Hasselbeck, co-host of television’s *The View*, wrote a book-length memoir describing in explicitly salvific terms how gluten-free living saved her from a life of illness, depression, and potentially broken relationships (ABC News

2009). Substitute 'Jesus' for 'gluten-free' and Hasselbeck's book – along with the claims of numerous gluten-free celebrities – would sound identical to standard American evangelical discourse on the saving power of Christ.

As the gluten-free lifestyle became more popular and associated with the faddishness of celebrities, those with diagnosed medical allergies to gluten, that is coeliac sufferers, responded with their own declarations of identity. 'Gluten-Dude', one of the most popular coeliac disease bloggers, retorted with a parody of one of Lady Gaga's hit song titles in response to her self-proclaimed foodway choices, 'Lady Gaga May be Gluten-Free...But Baby I Was Born This Way' (Gluten Dude 2012). Another gluten-free blogger, a self-diagnosed coeliac, simply stated outright in response to the perceived faddishness of the foodway, that her eating choices were rooted in her basic embodied identity. 'I don't have a solid explanation for this, but I don't need to. All I know is I am aware how what I take into my body makes me feel, and the guidelines of a gluten-free diet make me feel better. End of story. Stop the sniveling' (Sarah B 2014). Both those with social as well as medical reasons for adopting gluten-free foodways have begun to use the same language of embodied identity to self-express their food practices. The transformation of a medical condition into a marker of identity has broader resonance in American culture. The medical sociologist Gayle Sulik has argued that the same shift has occurred among those diagnosed with and recovered from breast cancer, and Jo Nash has found the same process at work in 'Pro-Ana' or pro-anorexia subcultures that have transformed this disease into what Nash calls a 'mutant spirituality' (Sulik 2011, Nash 2006). In all such cases, practitioners create personally meaningful identities through highly individualized practices that they consider rooted in their 'authentic selves'. This represents a secularized, individualistic, quest for create a personally meaningful and authentic sense of self.

Yet for others, the gluten-free lifestyle both inculcates and requires a community. The blogger 'Gluten-Free-Girl', one of the most popular writers on gluten-free living, explains of her experience and advice on going gluten-free, 'You need even more community now. You need friends who understand this, families who support you, and good people who let you cry on their shoulder when your relative says, Oh come on, it's just a little flour. What harm could it do?' (Gluten-Free-Girl 2014). Here, Gluten-Free-Girl engages in the same sort of cultural construction of community that Anna Meigs (1997: 95) writes of in her study of food practices in the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea. Food inculcates 'bonds of social alliance and solidarity,' to borrow Meig's term, through shared norms of practice and belief. Leonard Norman Primiano (2014) argues the same in his consideration of how the International Peace Mission

Movement (Father Divine Movement) created a new community around a shared foodway. Gluten-free eaters form communities.

Still other anti-gluten activists invoked transcendental qualities to mark gluten as taboo. 'Good Living Doc' writes on his blog: 'Gluten is evil. There, I said it' (Good Living Doc 2013). Explaining his logic, the Good Living Doc indicates that 'Gluten doesn't want to be eaten. No, I'm not suggesting gluten has a conscious opinion about survival, but survival is an innate drive built into every living organism on a cellular level' (*ibid.*). Despite his caution to the contrary, the Doc clearly imbues gluten with a near-conscious ability to infiltrate and destroy the human body. It is 'evil', Good Living Doc repeats several times in his writing.

This talk of community, identity, salvation, and transcendent notions of evil all strike me as if not religious, at least quasi-religious. The vehemence with which gluten-free eaters defend their foodways, as well as with which critics assail gluten-free eating, show how important practitioners take this foodway to be. Michael Pollan, who in his *Omnivore's Dilemma* idolized wheat bread as a symbol of food tradition and stability, has attacked gluten-free living as 'a bit of a social contagion' (Pollan 2006, 2014). Such language of collective contamination is matched especially by the back-and-forth conversations in the comments sections of digital news articles or social network postings about gluten-free eating. On one cautionary article about gluten-free eating posted to *Scientific American's* website, one can find accusations against pro- and anti-gluten eaters as sick, brainwashed, duped, and stupid (Rettner 2013). Comments quickly spiral into attacks of, or defences of, a broad range of social forces, including medicine, science, technology, and religion. A recent post on *National Public Radio's* website found each side accusing the other of anti-intellectualism and collusion with unnamed nefarious corporate interests (Barclay 2014).

Perhaps most emblematic was a recent comedy sketch produced by the late-night television comedian Jimmy Kimmel, who recorded an assistant asking a number of Los Angelinos who claim to be gluten intolerant if they knew what gluten was. None did (Jimmy Kimmel Live 2014). Internet commentators disparaged these apparently ignorant individuals proclaiming intolerance, unwillingness, or an inability to eat gluten without knowing what it was or why they could not do so. The comments sections on Youtube, Huffington Post, and other sites where the clip was posted attacked these individuals as at best faddish and at worst ignorant. 'Here in L[os] A[ngeles] [gluten] is comparable to Satanism', summarized Kimmel (*ibid.*). Maybe. However, is the inability of gluten-free eaters to know what gluten is really that different from a Jew who does not know the details of *kasbrut*? Or a Muslim ignorant of the details of

how meat is made *hala?* Or an Irish-American Catholic explaining why, for some unknown reason, corned beef and cabbage is so important on St Patrick's Day? One does not need to explain religion for it to be real in the lives of individual practitioners.

The Paleolithic Diet as epicurean ascetism and quasi-religion

A few weeks before I wrote the address that evolved into this article, I received in the mail my monthly copy of *Silent Sports*, a magazine for aficionados of Nordic skiing, bicycling, running, and other self-propelled sports in North America's Upper Midwestern region. I was not thinking about my research as I leafed through the magazine. Yet there, in the monthly magazine column about sports and nutrition, I saw the headline 'Would the Paleolithic Diet work for ultrarunners?' I am not an ultrarunner, but I read on. The columnist, a dietician and Nordic ski competitor, explained that she knew little about the Paleolithic Diet until several readers emailed her about it. So she researched it. 'A cursory search on the Web reveals a number of interpretations of their diet, some sounding more like a religious movement than a way to eat food', she summarized (Marlor 2014: 36). What did this columnist mean by this equation of the Paleolithic Diet and religion?

Numerous forms of the Paleolithic foodway exist. Some are more religious than others. All agree that one ought to eat how practitioners imagine our ancient Paleolithic ancestors did, under the premise that the human body evolved under those conditions and is attuned to that diet. This generally entails avoiding the 'foods of civilization' that humans developed after the advent of agriculture: grains, legumes, dairy, and any more recent refined or processed foods. Those are the taboos. Paleolithic eaters also have totemic foods, those associated with what they claim a caveman eats. This includes large quantities of meat and the plants for which one might conceivably forage, such as root vegetables and nuts. The most notable Paleolithic diet, the 'Paleo Diet', a registered trademark of Loren Cordain and his Sage Marketing Group, proclaims itself the 'world's healthiest diet', and promises everything from weight loss to longer life to improved libido (Sage Marketing 2014).

Though different Paleolithic adherents follow numerous and varied rules and codes as to what they may and may not eat, its totems and taboos do not vary from the general Paleolithic outline. That said, 'Paleo' and its foodway kin fetishizes the foods of the upper middle class, transforming them into icons of health, longevity, and prowess. Its cookbooks and website feature Copper River salmon, sushi, roast bison, and a variety of 'California cuisine' as featured Paleo

foods. Perusing Paleolithic cookbooks reveals that a form of epicurean asceticism characterizes this foodway. Adherents certainly eschew certain foodstuffs, but they embrace the sorts of foods that mark consumers as both high-class in taste as well as finances. More than just a general form of creating identity through consumption, Paleo represents a specialized form of consuming specialized foods that distinguish the consumer as a self-controlled yet refined gustatory savant.

Other Paleolithic options even more explicitly move from foodway to totalistic worldview. Mark Sisson's *The Primal Blueprint* (2013), relies upon what he calls the ten 'Primal Laws'. A latter-day Moses, Sisson's laws regulate how those living the Paleolithic lifestyle are to live, ranging from 'getting adequate sleep' (law 6) to 'play' (law 7) to 'using your brain' (law 10). Little of this relates to food. Rather, following Sisson's laws creates a new form of identity modelled on consuming and living in accordance with a high-class yet self-controlled lifestyle. Sisson's call for Paleolithic eaters to 'play' each day, and to sleep full eight-hour nights recalls Thorstein Veblen's note that a dedication to leisure marks the American upper classes, something that Sissons instills in his Paleolithic system (Veblen 1973 [1899]). Of course, those following the Sisson Primal Blueprint variant of Paleolithic eating also eat. For breakfast Sisson recommends one of his 'balanced meal replacement shakes' that he sells in his store, a salad with fresh vegetables and canned salmon, a snack of nuts such as macadamia or pinion, and a dinner of a 'a good cut of meat' (Sisson 2009). Sisson does not provide the average cost of this daily regiment, but it surely surpasses the income of an individual or family earning the American or even Canadian minimum wage.

For all of these diets, authors call for adherents to adopt a specific lifestyle similar to how they imagine ancient people lived. Some take explicitly anti-technological and anti-medical positions such as opposing vaccines, antibiotics, footwear, and dental care. Several years ago *The New York Times* featured extensive interviews with several proponents of Paleolithic eating who explicitly developed their foodways into what they called 'caveman lifestyles.' The *Times* described it as urban machismo, with its emphasis on consuming massive amounts of meat and engaging in exercise routines that proponents consider Paleolithic, such as playing catch with stones and scurrying on all fours beneath underbrush in New York City's Central Park. The article noted disagreements within the Paleolithic tribe, ranging from whether new world foods were acceptable to whether one was permitted to cook one's meat or had to eat it raw. (Goldstein 2010)

In her well-respected study of the development of *kashrut*, Jean Soler (1979: 126) argues that dietary habits define a society. 'Cooking is a language through

which a society expresses itself,' she writes. Soler's own research leads her to study how the laws of *kashrut* served ancient Jews to develop and form relationships between the foods they eat and their place in the world. *The New York Times* has found the same among the Paleolithic eaters of New York. Members of the 'Paleo tribe' have created personally meaningful worldviews that allow them to live in the world and respond to its various anxieties, especially those involving food and eating. They have created communities, codes of ethics, and even an alternative subculture around this quasi-religious foodway.

This appeal to lifestyle, rules, codes, led popular nutrition blogger 'SkepticRD' ('RD' stands for registered dietitian) to ask, 'Are you trying a new diet or a new religion?' (SkepticRD 2012). In providing a set of guidelines by which to live one's life, linking what one eats to what one does, how one lives, with whom one spends one's time, and beliefs about the nature of the human condition and human body, the Paleolithic foodway looks quite a bit like religion. The fact that Paleolithic assumptions are really based on faith and self-proclaimed experience, rather than scientific studies or anthropological research, only supports that contention. One forum for Paleolithic eaters I visited included a fierce defence by practitioners of why wine – which is by definition a product of agriculture – was not in fact a product of agriculture. Rather than dismiss Paleolithic eaters as irrational, I see this as simply a form of the religious non-rational. If wine can be the Blood of Christ, why can it not also be the drink of cavemen?

Numerous commentators, authors, bloggers, and dieters who participate in the Paleolithic subculture concur that something about their lifestyle and similar diets seems quite religious. Darren Beattie, writing for a fitness company marketing Paleolithic foodways as well as other forms of dieting, invokes the sectarian quality of religion in making the comparison between Paleo and religion. 'Diets, the New Religion?' he asks. 'People are generally intolerant of others' beliefs, which is exactly how I see very religious people, treating other religions. I couldn't help but notice that "diets" these days resemble that of a religious or cult following, at least for a little while' (Beattie 2010). One of the more reflective and popular activists for Paleolithic living, 'Caveman Greg', even penned an epistle of sorts linking the Paleolithic lifestyle to religion and calling for adherents of Paleolithic eating to explicitly integrate spiritual beliefs into their practices, so as to support a healthy and holistic lifestyle (Caveman Greg 2011). For this practitioner, and many others, Paleolithic eating takes on many of the forms of functions of religion, ranging from identity work and community building to ethics, morality, and a transcendent notion of what is correct and authentic.

Some conclusions

David Sax, the *Los Angeles Times* journalist and author of *The Tastemakers: Why We're Crazy for Cupcakes but Fed Up with Fondue*, writes that ‘There are few cities that can compete with Los Angeles for the sheer energy its residents pour into health and diet trends. This town is the world leader in anxiety over what you should, and shouldn’t, be eating. . . . it’s become clear no food trend is more powerful, and potentially dangerous, than one that targets health and diet’ (Sax 2014). Whether Sax is correct about Los Angeles is immaterial. Yet he focuses on an important fact: the alternative foodways I have considered all help practitioners respond to profound senses of food anxiety that define modern North America. Concerns over processed foods, genetically-modified organisms, pesticides and other contaminants, big agriculture, environmental and social sustainability, and nutrition, have become rife. Scientific studies provide little certainty, and the sheer abundance of choice in a globalized world of food forces consumers to decide what they will and will not eat given a fundamental lack of knowledge about what is best for them, their society, and their environment. In a typical aisle of an American grocery store one must ask, Organic eggs? Cage-free eggs? Omega-three infused? Local? Vegetarian-fed? Brown? White? Or maybe one should skip the eggs and go vegan. Or buy some chickens and grow your own. (Or maybe ducks?) Quasi-religious foodways provide certainty, offering a system of totems and taboos that practitioners can accept and deploy to make sense of their foodway choices and assuage anxiety. As Freud described, this is one of the fundamental roles of religion in modern society, and while he dismissed religious solutions to anxiety as inferior to scientific psychoanalytic ones, they are surely as powerful if not more so.

Quasi-religious foodway practices allow individuals to not only assuage anxiety, but also mark their identity. The use of food to do so is of course not new. Even if we look only to religious codes of proscription in prescription, examples such as Jewish *kasbrut* and Islamic codes of *halal* indicate that food restrictions function to create and maintain social barriers and support religious identities. However, in such food traditions identity always falls within an inherited community ethos. Following *kasbrut* marks one as belonging to the Jewish community and possessing a Jewish identity. Following the laws of *halal* do the same for the Islamic community and Islamic identity. For those individuals who adopt gluten-free eating, veganism, Paleolithic eating, and other alternative foodways, the marking of identity occurs in different manner, one highly individualistic and driven by that most American of practices: consumption. While choosing to adopt these diets certainly embeds one within a broader

community of fellow eaters, it is ultimately a highly individualistic action rather than an acceptance of community norms. It is an individual rather than a religious tradition, a sacred text, one's parents, or a legal code that determines what one chooses to eat. Such individualism roots quasi-religious eating as embedded within contemporary individualistic Western culture. Further, these various food practices reveal a specific sort of identity work: identity through consumption. One literally purchases and consumes one's identity, investing a gluten-free brownie or Copper River salmon with broad social meaning.

These quasi-religious foodways therefore function to allow contemporary, consumer-oriented, individualistic North Americans to engage in discourses of community, identity, and meaning in a highly vernacular manner; that of the marketplace. They also point to the manner in which identity and community have expanded well outside of religious categories. A much trumpeted recent survey showed that a fifth of Americans have become religiously unaffiliated, though the majority of these still possessed some religious or spiritual practices and beliefs (Pew Forum 2012). Such identity now plays out within the realm of the quasi-religious. One finds religion not only in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. One also finds it at the grocery store.

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