

# Respectfully eating or not eating

Putting food at the centre of Religious Studies

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With reference to data drawn from both ethnology and ethology, I argue that studying foodways does not merely add additional information about religions, but enables better understanding of religion. Rather than defining religion cognitively in relation to beliefs and believing (modernist tropes that have shaped the study of religion) I explore the effect of defining religion in relation to the questions, 'what do you eat?' and 'with whom do you eat?'

Food is more than a pinch of additional spice among the many topics available to scholars of religion. Researching foodways (everything related to the production and consumption of food) incites us to re-direct our attention to vital and generative matters among all religions. It reinforces the need for vernacular, material and performative issues to be placed firmly at the centre of our discipline.

If I were to push a claim to its extreme limits, I *could* assert that religion begins with eating. It certainly has much to do with what people eat or avoid eating, and with whom they eat or avoid eating. The intimate violence required in order to eat other living beings is at the heart of the relational engagement with the world that is life. Acts of consumption are allowed or constrained by religion as they are braided into both value systems and performative traditions. As such, food rules are among the quintessential forms of taboo that pervade and structure societies and cultures. Foodways are so frequently central to religious acts (even if they are insufficiently recognised as such) that they may define 'religion' as much as they differentiate between religions. Specific religions become identifiable, definable and observable when we attend to their meals (including their production and their aftermath) and also to feasting, fasting and other modes of celebration and abstinence. Perhaps religion (as a locus of scholarly attention) ought to be defined not as believing but as eating. In this article, I seek to explore and justify these assertions as a challenge to colleagues to make a feast out of the topic of religion and food by contemplating

'religion as food'. By way of an extended preface, the following section contextualises my main argument by pointing away from believing towards socialising.

### Religion is not entirely modernist

Bruno Latour is famous for asserting that 'we have never been modern' (1993). He means by this that the project of modernity has not succeeded in completely shaping the ways in which humans engage with or speak or think about the world. We do not entirely separate 'nature' from 'culture'. My assertion that 'religion has never been modern' is offered in that context. I do not mean that religion is primitive, a foolish irrationality left over from earlier epochs of human cultural evolution. Just as Latour's phrase can be expanded with the acknowledgement that some of us have tried hard to be modern and have even tried to impose modernity globally, so religions have tried to be modern. People have attempted to fit into the modern system by allowing the word 'religion' to label private beliefs about matters that are irrelevant to nation states. The United Nations declares that there is a universal freedom to believe anything. It allows, however, that there are apparently legitimate restrictions on acting on beliefs that might challenge the authority of political and public order. Displaying markers of religious affiliation too publically is likely to lead one to be identified as a 'fundamentalist' or 'extremist'. Early modernity's 'wars of state making' (which are often mis-identified as 'wars of religion') continue wherever people are vilified for becoming 'radical' or even 'militant' about religion (Cavanaugh 1995, King 2007). In short, when religion means more to people than 'odd ideas that hardly affect relationships with other people' they are demonstrating that religion is not, for them at least, entirely modern.

The study of religions has, however, far too often been almost completely modern. It has colluded with the notion that religion is believing. In research and teaching, it has emphasised odd ideas, cognitive process and unusual polemics rather than matters of relationship, materiality and performance. When these are engaged with, it has usually been as 'expressions' or 'representations' of properly religious believing. However, we are now well into an era that emphasises the study of religious performance and materiality. We are indebted to books with titles like *More than Belief* (Vásquez 2011) which point us away from privatised, individualised and interiorised acts of peculiar believing towards social acts of embodied, located, performative persons. Religion is no longer solely to be conceived of as a kind of mask worn by (Durkheimian) 'Society' but may be theorised as an aspect of the continuous relational interactions of social beings.

## Rejecting bland representations

Too often, textbooks about particular religions use dietary matters to give an introductory flavour of ways in which people live or practice their religions. Or they talk about festival foods or fasts to illustrate the living out of religious ideologies and systems. They use words like ‘represent’, ‘manifest’ and ‘express’ to indicate that foodways are among the practices which act as the public appearances of (allegedly more definitive) religious ‘beliefs’. While such approaches may offer an entrée to the study of lived religion, they remain bland and cannot nourish a full understanding. In both deliberate and subtle ways they reinforce the all too prevalent idea that religion exists before any actual performance, activity or living takes place. In some traditional scholarly approaches, religions can appear to be systems of teachings that may be expressed in ritual or daily life, represented in costume or art, and/or manifest in architecture, texts and/or symbols. Religions seem to exist independently of lived realities. Indeed, those ‘expressions’ may themselves be represented as only partially matching the supposedly normative form of a religion, that is ‘believing’ – as if ‘religion’ could exist independently of life. Until recently, considerable emphasis has been put on excavating these expressions, representations and symbols in order to uncover the underlying teachings, ideas or ideologies. It seems to have been more important to discover ‘what this religion teaches by encouraging or opposing this act’ than to understand what religion *is* if it is all about eating or not eating particular foods, wearing or not wearing particular costumes, talking or singing together at agreed times and venues, and so on.

The ‘turn’ towards vernacular and/or lived religion by scholars of religion (especially Leonard Primiano 1995, 2012; and Meredith McGuire 2008) resonates with wider scholarly turns towards performance, embodiment, materiality and, most recently, relationality (especially see Vásquez 2011, Harvey 2013). Together these emphases and approaches provide a resounding invitation to make far more of foodways than using them as mere data to flavour analysis or theorising. Rather, in studying ‘religion and food’ we are re-evaluating our discipline’s focus and approaches. We are attending to what people do in the real world. We are analysing and debating the lived realities of human behaviours in relation to the larger than human world and cosmos.

In the remainder of this chapter, I make use of a series of questions that have provoked me to think differently about the implications of researching religion and food. I begin by contesting existing approaches and move on to illustrating potentially more fruitful lines of enquiry. In the next two sections, questions about the Christian Eucharist initiate a rethinking of issues that have marked or moulded common ways of understanding and studying religion(s).

In the first of these sections, an over-emphasis on representation or symbolism is traced to Reformation-era disagreements over the Eucharist. Secondly, an emphasis on what religious elites do in the Eucharist has distracted us from studying the ways in which the majority of Christians perform their religion. We have, for example, been led to study interiority and transcendence as defined by authorities rather than relationships and interactions as performed by all religionists. Since the study of Protestant Christianity has played a definitive role in defining and studying all religions, these two issues – over-emphasising representation and belief and over-emphasising elites – have had a baleful effect on our discipline.

In seeking to provoke more exciting thinking about religion, as well as about relationships between religion and food, I then ask some unusual questions. Why do only some chimpanzees eat ants or termites? Is ‘doing violence with impunity’ the purpose of religious activity everywhere as Te Pakaka Tawhai (1988) claimed is true for his Maori community? Should researchers ask their hosts or informants, ‘who do you eat?’ rather than ‘what do you believe?’ The end result of discussing these questions may be a strengthening of a focus on topics that seem familiar (e.g. purity rules and taboo), and could also have been achieved by discussing *kasbrut*, *halal* or other foodways, or by renewing familiarity with Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1992). The virtue of engaging with less familiar ways of achieving a similar result is that my aim is both to place food (its creation, consumption and consequences) at the absolute centre of our discipline and to provide better foundations for better scholarly approaches to lived religion. The resilience of what we have come to know as the ‘world religions paradigm’ demonstrates that it is all too easy to know we can do better but all but impossible to move on. Considering religion *as* foodways (rather than merely ‘religion and food’) places our subject matter firmly in the context of human interactions with the larger-than-human world. Food is not only ‘good to think’, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969: 62, 89) said of animals as totems, but vital to our living within the community of life, nowhere more intimately than in the food chain.

## Bread and body

The question of what Christians eat when participating in the Eucharist is not only of historical or theological interest. Neither should it interest those who research ‘religion and food’ only because of the surprising variety of ways in which Christians make and distribute ‘the host’ or dispose of whatever does not get consumed during the ritual. More than this, conflicts over the Eucharist were

foundational to the constitution and construction of early modernity. Since this evolving modernity has been exported globally to become the dominant world ideology, the results of those conflicts about bread and wine ought to interest everyone. The issue is not really ‘what do Christians eat when they participate in the Eucharist?’ That is a more theological and sectarian matter than is usefully addressed here. Rather, what interests me is the ramifications of those historic and continuing disputes in our wider culture, in the construction of ourselves as scholars, and in the study of religion(s).

In early modernity western European Christians structured their communities around competing understandings about the Eucharist and other ritual matters. One of these other matters was the ‘Communion of Saints’. Roman Catholics insisted that praying for and being prayed for by the deceased was effective and valuable (especially in the presence of relics). Protestants proclaimed that at death people either entered heaven or hell and played no role (other than as examples) in determining the eternal salvation of their still living kin. This was a necessary (to them) implication of the conflict initiated by the elevation of an individualised and interiorised notion of ‘faith’ to pre-eminence among Protestants. This shift from ‘faithfulness’ to ‘faith’ or from ‘trust’ to ‘believing’ (to encapsulate a complex phenomena briefly) and from ‘church’ to ‘believer’ also impacted Christian understandings of the Eucharist. Christian relationality was altered by a distancing of the Christian deity from what were asserted to be (material) signs, symbols and representations of his (spiritual) presence. The bread and wine which transubstantiated into divine body and blood as Catholic priests intoned the scriptural and liturgical phrases ‘this is my body’ and ‘this is my blood’ became transformative representations (without themselves being materially transformed) in Protestant rites. Christian material and performance culture changed dramatically and, sometimes, violently.

As Protestantism diversified so did the ways of explaining or expressing the relationship between bread and body. This is familiar territory to most scholars interested in religion or in European history. My purpose here is to indicate that something profound happened to European (and subsequent colonial and global) cultural discourses and performances under the influence of these early modern reformations. For one thing, the apparently simple word ‘is’ became loaded with increasingly complex freight. If ritualists could no longer say ‘this [bread] is my body’ without expecting to be understood to mean complicated things about signs, symbols and representations, more everyday uses of the word ‘is’ caught the same tendency towards convolution. A painting or photograph of a person or a scene cannot simply be explained with phrases like ‘this is my wife’ or ‘this is my garden’. There is no equivalence. The sign can only be something

other than that towards which it points. Much of modernity's understanding of 'art' begins here. But that is not all.

It is possible that matters were always more complex than I am suggesting here. I cannot be certain, for example, that ancient paintings or statues of Roman emperors were not understood by their first Roman viewers as *representations* of a distant ruler or as *signs* of his authority. Perhaps they were taken to be some kind of real presence of the emperor. However, my difficulty in knowing what 'is' does in those phrases is partly caused by the fact that centuries of European enculturation have made the notion of representation 'natural' to me. I hear the words 'this is my wife' or 'this is the emperor' but I hear 'this represents my wife' or 'this signifies the authority of the emperor'. At international borders things become a little more complicated because there is supposed to be an equivalence between a passport photograph and the person showing it to immigration officers. We prove our identities by showing something that is somehow understood to be identical to ourselves. An opposite trajectory to the reforming insertion of the idea of symbolism or representation into interpersonal relationships seems to be pursued here. Matters can be even more different elsewhere. For example, for (Native American) Zuni traditionalists, anyone who makes a *koko* mask is making a Zuni *koko* mask. As Pia Altieri demonstrates (2000: 139), it is simply not possible to make a copy, replica, model or representation of these masks. Since each *koko* mask is a personal and relational being, the act of making a mask is a relational act that employs Zuni sacred knowledge and establishes or enriches relations between the maker and the *koko*. The ethnicity or intention of the mask's maker is irrelevant: if museum curators or youth groups make *koko* masks they are making relations within the Zuni world. Any such mask *is* an authentic Zuni mask and never a mere replica or neutral representation.

Changes circulating around the Eucharistic bread and wine are among the roots of prevalent, taken-for-granted contemporary definitions of and approaches to religion because too many textbooks and introductory courses about religion indicate that food, costumes, buildings and ceremonies *represent* religion. They are not themselves 'religion' because that is all about the interior beliefs (or non-empirical postulations) rather than being actions in a material world. Happily, this inherited and misguided approach is being challenged. Thinking again about food and religion is pushing forward the project of thinking more carefully about lived religion.

## Wine and tea

In addition to the over-emphasis on interiority brought about by treating Eucharistic bread and wine as representations of more 'spiritual' realities, the study of religion has also colluded with religious elites in largely ignoring 'ordinary people'. Indeed, my use of a single name, 'the Eucharist', masks considerable variety and epic conflicts among Christians. It suggests a commonality belied by the diversity of Christian teaching, understanding, performance and debate. While it may be useful to treat these varied rites as the defining rituals of Christianity, what they define most clearly is the particular, local, and sometimes conflictual nature of plural Christianities in real life.

In addition, and far more interestingly, if we surrender to the normative call to direct our attention towards actions at the altar or table of churches we might fail to see the richness of what 'ordinary' Christians do as crucial aspects of lived Christianity. We might, for instance, mistakenly think that the drinking of tea or coffee is utterly separate from the 'real' ritual. We may not recognise that these seemingly more mundane acts of consumption are integral to establishing and reinforcing community and even *communitas*. They might not be symbolically rich. They might not represent anything. Few if any 'believers' say much to researchers about the religious meaning of tea drinking, flower arranging or many other putatively mundane acts undertaken in churches. However, scholars of religion need not follow this lead any more than we should allow our attention to be directed by the elite who manipulate bread and wine at the altar. Rather, if we consider that religion might have everything to do with communities eating together, we might place equal or even greater weight on the more frequent sharing of tea, coffee or fruit juice than on the less common ingestion of small bits of bread and small sips of wine. By all these acts of sharing together people become a congregation or community. They also become distinct from groups with whom they do not share. This, I believe, is religion and not merely a manifestation of religion. Perhaps a dramatically different culinary context will help me to develop that thought.

## Chimpanzee diets and religion

The primatologist Jane Goodall says that she is often asked 'if the chimpanzees show any signs of religious behavior' (2005: 1304). She and other researchers from various disciplines have debated evidence of religious behaviours or religious experiences among chimpanzees. Their approaches and evidence bases are admirably surveyed by James Harrod (2014) who advances an argument that

chimpanzees do indeed behave in ways that match his ‘non-anthropocentric, trans-species definition of religion’ (also see Harrod 2011). That is, chimpanzees engage in complex and deliberate behaviours which demonstrate prototypical characteristics of religion such as ‘reverence, careful observation, wonder, awe, and empathic intimacy’ (Harrod 2014: 9). He could have added evidence relating to the ‘culinary rites’ which he lists among other ‘possible categories of ritual’ but does not illustrate with reference to chimpanzees.

Evolutionary anthropologists and ‘panthropologists’ have greatly enriched understanding of chimpanzee tool use and dietary behaviours. For instance, in writing about the ‘Subsistence technology of Nigerian chimpanzees’, Andrew Fowler and Volker Sommer (2007) present evidence of complex choices and deliberate learning among chimpanzees. Specific tools are made, adapted and learnt within particular groups. These are used to obtain particular food sources. What interests me is that some chimpanzees use these tools to capture and eat ants while others use them to capture and eat termites. Ants and termites are available to most chimpanzees but particular communities select or reject them as food. Speculating about why this might be the case leads Fowler, Sommer and colleagues to write:

it is entirely possible that Gashaka chimpanzees do not consume termites, because ‘it is not something that is done here’ (McGrew 2004) – similarly to the situation at Mahale/Tanzania, where termites are consumed in one community, but not the neighbouring (Whiten *et al.* 2001). ... 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. (Fowler *et al.* 2011: 482)

Sommer and colleagues are developing this argument about the ‘arbitrary/non-practical aspect of certain behaviours that assist to create some sort of random in-group/out-group identity’ (sometimes with violence) which would in human populations often be called ‘taboo’ (Sommer, personal communication; but also see Sommer and Parish 2010, and Sommer *et al.*, forthcoming). That eating particular foods, or wearing particular costumes, or acting in particular ways is ‘not something that is done here’ seems an excellent summary of the negative, boundary policing rules that could be taken to define religion in lived reality. The positive version is equally definitive: eating particular foods

and wearing particular costumes is exactly the kind of thing that ‘makes us who we are’. Indeed, they make otherwise unrelated individuals into a community, a ‘we’. Such an argument is familiar to those inspired by Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1992). While a remarkable array of explanations have been offered as to why some people do not eat some ‘perfectly edible food item’ (e.g. horses, pigs, dogs or any meat), Douglas’ argument may be perfectly summed up in McGrew’s words: ‘it is not something that is done here’. Those other communities who seem to make the eating of the same items central to their social relations or cultural actions act no less randomly or arbitrarily. No one is compelled to eat anything simply because it is edible. However, everyone (chimpanzees as much as humans) is born into a cultural context with expectations about what will be eaten or not eaten. What would otherwise be random becomes meaningful only when we understand that to be ‘us’ is to eat or not eat (to wear or not wear, to sing or not sing, to dance or not dance, to arrange flowers or not to arrange flowers) in given ways. Those who wish to act (eat, wear, sing, dance or arrange flowers) differently must take the consequences or find another community.

If chimpanzees have taboos (which presumably can be broken as well as maintained, perhaps at some cost), and if taboos are pervasive among religions, perhaps chimpanzees are religious. Perhaps taboo and religion are closely related terms or even synonyms. If so, to study foodways is to study religion.

### Violence with impunity

Jonathan Z. Smith has famously asserted that religion ‘can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways’ (1998: 281). The Maori scholar Te Pakaka Tawhai offers what may seem a surprising definition. In relation to his people’s traditional knowledge he wrote,

the purpose of religious activity here 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. (Tawhai 1988: 101)

My *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life* (2013) was initiated by reflection on whether Tawhai’s definition is applicable elsewhere. Does ‘doing violence with impunity’ successfully define ‘religion’ beyond

the borders of Tawhai's Ngati Uepohatu homeland at the East Cape of Aotearoa New Zealand? It certainly emphasises the links between ritual, food and community, but far more is involved here than merely adding some more (exotic) data.

Tawhai's explanation relies on a number of facts. In order to feed guests, one must have planted, tended and harvested *kumara*, sweet potatoes. The intimacy of this relationship reciprocates the care afforded to Maori when *kumara* migrated with them to what is now New Zealand. Understanding that plants are not inanimate objects or mere resources but personal beings may further our appreciation of the fact that digging up the tubers is an act of violence. Even if such violence is required by the cultural imperative to feed guests, it is not made automatically acceptable. There is nothing neutral about food and consumption: it is burdened with ethical and cultural weight. 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. Indeed, these sets of relationships are entwined. Guest-making rituals are among the most important Maori cultural activities. They involve the negotiation of taboo statuses and relationships. Someone new (like a host or a visitor) or something new (like a fresh meeting house) is deemed *tapu* (as Maori dialect renders 'taboo') until normalised by deliberate acts. These may include people eating together, as they do in the case of guest-making. Thus, social life and cultural interactions could not continue without the taking of life in order to produce food. But Tawhai describes a world in which 'social life' and 'culture' do not only include humans but embrace a larger-than-human community.

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. (Rasmussen 1929: 55–6)

Charles Darwin taught the same truth, albeit without recourse to the notion of 'souls'. The 'creatures that we have to kill' are our evolutionary and ecological relations, many with flesh, bones, families and activities that look quite like our own. 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 necessary. Local context 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. We could examine a number of other cultural and/or religious lifeways, but questions about planting and eating invite thoughts about veganism. While some vegans justify their chosen diet by citing the sentience of animals or their ability to feel pain, others are not convinced that plants are insensate in relevant ways. If they are right, veganism may reduce the number of acts of consumption (i.e. eating plants directly rather than eating plants-transformed-into-flesh) without ending predatory acts. More to the point, diminishing one's impact within the food chain does not automatically bring about impunity for acts of killing. As Tawhai suggests of his Maori community, vegans too might need to 'seek permission and offer placation' to plants.

Killing, then, is a crucial element of everyday life in the real world, even for those of us who employ others to kill for us. We cannot, even if we wished, escape this cycle of violence by ending our own lives because our skin and guts are home to myriad lively bacteria (Wade 2008). As inherently symbiotic beings, neither our bodies nor our lives and deaths are entirely 'ours'. We live as communal beings even when we are without the company of other humans. When we die, many other beings die with (in and on) us. Acknowledging our involvement in food chains, and hearing the seemingly ubiquitous decree 'do not kill', may enable us to recognise the force of Tawhai's evocative and provocative proposal that 'the purpose of religious activity ... is doing violence with impunity'. If so, the study of foodways takes us to the heart and guts of understanding religion as a crucial aspect of human relations with the larger-than-human world and especially with those other-than-human beings consumed by humans.

### Eating with others

As a thought experiment, I wonder what the scholarly study of religion would have been like if it had emerged in a culture significantly moulded by any religion other than Protestant Christianity. If the dominant culture had been that of observant Jews would our textbooks invite students to reflect on food choices as their principle subject matter? Would researchers meeting new informants ask 'what do you eat?' and/or 'what do you not eat?' rather than worrying

about odd (i.e. non-secular, non-empirical) beliefs? If our habits of thought and behaviour had been shaped by animism (Harvey 2005) rather than modernism would we have phrased our questions more relationally, for example as ‘who do you eat?’, and attended more closely to inter-species interactions rather than to transcendence?

This is more than an idle speculation to while away some time between proper scholarly enquiries. It is part of an effort to contest the modernist assumptions and practices that inform and constrain us. It is a test of the taboo system of a discipline in which people can be marginalised for ‘believing’ what their host communities allegedly believe. A quite different relationship between scholars and practitioners could emerge if scholars were to be most interested in questions of performance. Our positions (in academia and in religious contexts) could be quite different if they were marked by degrees of observance (discerned, e.g., by answering ‘what do you eat?’) rather than being tangled up in worries about adherence to possible irrationalities. We would be researching and teaching about public, communal, performative, embodied and located matters rather than about putatively private and interior ones. We would have far easier access to those materialised realms than we do to imaginary worlds of imagined believers. I concur with Latour (2010) that we have become believers in belief and that, in doing so, we have misunderstood precisely that part of the world (a pervasively interactive community) which our discipline is supposed to study: religion.

When we think of religion and of our task as scholars of religion more relationally we find that asking ‘what do you eat?’, ‘what do you not eat?’, ‘with whom do you eat?’ and ‘with whom do you not eat?’ are vitally important questions. Foodways are at the heart of the many specific, local and generative taboo systems that are taught and, to one degree or another, adopted, adapted, negotiated or resisted by religious people. If we must seek systems, religion begins to look like a purity system rather than a belief one. We should not ask about cognition but consumption. What rules govern people’s choices of what to eat, when, where, how and with whom?

If we must seek the origins of religion, it seems to me entirely possible that religion did indeed begin with eating and not eating. Our first ancestors made choices about what to eat long before we were human, probably long before we were apes. Being embraided within the relational interactions of the whole community of life, religion may have begun when people sought permission from and expressed gratitude to those other-than-human persons who they wished to eat. But this is speculation and I might as easily assert that religion began when our first ancestors sought to communicate across species boundaries by

singing or otherwise sounding like other species. (If so, religion would fit better into Steven Mithen's [2005] views on the evolution of language and music than his brief allusion to cognitive scholarship allows.) I could as easily assert that religion began when those same early ancestors erected a pile of rocks or a cairn to mark a place of relationship establishing encounter with other-than-human persons. Interesting as these possibilities may or may not be, they are not my concern. Instead, I want to celebrate the fact that growing numbers of scholars are studying what people eat or avoid eating with other people.

However, I want to push this emergent project further. I want to insist that we do not only study 'religion and food' but 'religion as food'. Foodways are not just additional spice in our work. They get us to the heart of our subject matter. Whether or not you agree with Tawhai and me that religion is about the intimate and necessary violence of eating other living beings does not matter. If religions are (as some think) value systems and/or performative traditions, it is in the ways in which acts of consumption are allowed or constrained that we see them best. If foodways (what gets eaten or avoided with others) *is* definitive of religions, and religions are defined by meals (including their production and their aftermath) and by both feasting and fasting (and other modes of abstinence), they must also define 'religion'. If what people eat or avoid eating with other people defines the relational engagement with the world that we label 'religion', then our discipline should be evaluated according to its success or failure to analyse people's foodways.

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