

continue to do given the fact that, as Ward clearly demonstrates, both sides feed from the same consumer trough and so are not going away anytime soon.

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THEOLOGY ON THE MENU: ASCETICISM, MEAT AND CHRISTIAN DIET by David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Routledge*, London, 2010, pp. 224, £75 hbk, £21.99 pbk

Avoiding meat, however discreetly, provokes questions: ‘What is wrong with it?’, ‘Where do you draw the line?’ For the questioners, it often seems, the issues are black and white: either meat is murder or we should be carnivores without limit or discrimination. It is enormously refreshing to encounter instead the nuanced and subtle approach of David Grumett and Rachel Muers in this thoughtful and readable volume. They are constantly attentive to the moral, social and religious complexity of the question of abstinence, and to the multiple meanings that such a practice can carry.

The book is packed with details that reveal the breathtaking diversity of Christian attitudes to ascetical eating. At one end of the spectrum were the desert fathers, such as Abba Or, who took his pickled vegetables just once a week. At the other, those clergy of Reformation England who agreed to regulate their appetites according to hierarchy: archbishops would not take more than six meat or fish dishes at one sitting, bishops five, and deans and archdeacons four. Some Protestant reformers, including John Wesley, promoted abstinence from meat for the sake of both physical and spiritual health (one result of this was the invention of Kellogg’s cornflakes). By contrast, the Men and Religion Forward Movement prided itself on its hearty meat-eating and associated vegetarianism with spiritual as well as physical weakness.

The early chapters provide a historical overview, which identifies key moments of change. Jewish food laws were definitively, but not wholly, rejected by the apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem. It was not long before the desert hermits were taking fasting to new extremes. Coenobitic monasticism, tended at first to regulate fasting in order to moderate rather than increase the ascetical impulse. The close relations between the monasteries and secular society encouraged relaxations and dispensations, which then provoked restrictive regulation. Meanwhile, of course, the whole population followed the Church’s calendar of feasting and fasting, including the long Lenten abstinence from meat and certain other foods. The Reformation signalled a shift from ecclesial to civic control of communal fasting; the Long Parliament, for example, attempted, without great success, to replace the traditional cycle of fasting with a single monthly fast day, the purpose of which was largely political. It was not until 1856 that the statute for ‘fish days’ was repealed, ‘on grounds of disuse’ (though it is notable that some secular institutions even today continue the tradition of serving fish on Fridays). The end of legislation signalled the shift from a communal to an individualistic understanding: ‘fasting and abstinence’ were succeeded by ‘vegetarianism’ and ‘dietary preferences’.

The specific themes that Grumett and Muers explore bring out the tensions and paradoxes within their subject. The strictness of both eremitical and communal fasting did not remove the need to honour guests, which meant that the Christian tradition of abstinence always included a distinctive element of flexibility. Thus Cassian found the Egyptian monks readily postponing their fasting at the arrival of a guest, while the Rule of St Benedict prescribes a separate kitchen for the abbot and his guests. Similarly, the rhythm of alternate fasting and feasting allowed food to be used to represent both the Creator’s generous abundance and his creatures’

grief, sinfulness and need. Again, the observance of food customs has always been a powerful way of marking the boundaries of a community. Although Christianity began with a decisive rejection of the Jewish refusal to share meals with outsiders, it too quickly learnt to regard eating as a way of marking the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy, sometimes by insisting that members abstain from, at other times that they partake of, certain foods. So, for example, the same Christians whose liturgy celebrated the courage of the Maccabean martyrs could (under the Spanish Inquisition) break into private homes to ensure that lard rather than oil was being used for cooking: thus the pork-avoiding 'Judaizers' could be eradicated. The memory of Jewish practices is relevant also to a theme that is discussed here with great sensitivity and sympathy, that of animal sacrifice. Grumett and Muers bring out the way in which sacrificial or ritual slaughter, which has endured in certain Christian traditions, embodies realism and reverence in a way that contrasts strikingly with modern meat production. The person who takes the victim's life is chosen in part for his compassionate nature, the ritual is regulated to minimise suffering, those who consume the animal share in its killing and preparation, prayers of gratitude acknowledge the seriousness of what has taken place.

Within the vast variety of eating practices on display in Christian history, can we detect any kind of continuity? Or should the pluralism that Grumett and Muers reveal lead us to ethical indifference about food? First, and fundamentally, all eating has been seen as meaningful, in ways that appeal to health, friendship, social structure, and even political considerations. Secondly, this range of overlapping reasons has reinforced rather than weakened the ethical and religious significance of meals. One of the lessons of this book is that moral seriousness is compatible with both flexibility and nuance. Thirdly, fasting and abstinence have been practised almost everywhere that Christianity has flourished, and where they have been suppressed, they have soon recurred in a different form. Finally, for most of Christian history, these issues have been important to communities, not simply matters of private choice.

Grumett and Muers deliberately begin with practice, arguing that just as the *lex orandi* rightly shapes the *lex credendi*, so the practices of abstinence properly generate reflection upon their (often multiple) meanings. Whereas individual dietary choices must be self-conscious, the customs of a community may contain hidden and inarticulate wisdom. For this reason, it makes sense to scrutinise tradition as a resource for interrogating current practices, alerting us to ethical questions to which we may have become insensitive.

Is there any chance, one might wonder, that the Western Church could recover a communal sense of the significance of what, and how, we eat? We could begin by restoring the regular saying of grace. Perhaps the carnivores among us would like to add a specific prayer of thanks for the lives of the animals they are about to consume: thus both reverence and realism might return to the common table.

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ABSENCE OF MIND: THE DISPELLING OF INWARDNESS FROM THE MODERN MYTH OF THE SELF by Marilynne Robinson *Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011, pp. xviii + 158, £10.99 pbk*

With his characteristic blend of wit and deceptive simplicity, G.K. Chesterton once defined philosophy as 'thought that has been thought out'. He followed up this pithy definition with an account of why philosophy, so defined, is indispensable: 'It is often a great bore. But man has no alternative, except between being influenced by thought that has been thought out and being influenced by thought