A Christian diet: The case for food rules

by David Grumett in the April 6, 2010 issue

About ten years ago, I started to become vegetarian. I say started, because this was not a sudden conversion to the standard vegetarian menu. I kept on eating fish. I eat game from time to time, though only on special occasions.

While my menu shifted, my Christian observance continued pretty much the same. A cradle Anglican, I was at the time a graduate student at King's College, Cambridge, reading theology. Evensong in chapel was a staple of my spiritual diet, often followed by dinner in the hall. Although physical sustenance came right after spiritual sustenance, I had little sense of a link between the two beyond vague notions that sharing food with others was a good thing to do and that one should not take too much food in order to leave plenty for others.

As a Christian, I was not unusual in failing to make close connections between faith and food. For people of other religions, the links are much clearer. Muslims might be absent from lunch during Ramadan, while many Jews avoid pork and share the Passover meal. But for Christians the lack of any food rules at all is often a badge of distinction. Since the time of Augustine, food rules have been seen as markers of other religions, to be broken by Christians to prove that Christ has set them free.

In spreading the idea that food is for Christians a non issue, Augustine has a lot to answer for. He had his own motives for pushing that line. When he was a junior member of the Manichaean sect, he had attended Man ichaean meals in which, it was believed, the light particles trapped in food were liberated as the food was eaten. Vegetables composed most of the Manichaean diet, and meat was banned because it was the product of sexual intercourse.

Little wonder that Augustine wanted to distance himself from food rules once he became Christian. But in turning his back on Manichaean rituals, he failed to recognize the importance of what had by then become a well-established Christian tradition of dietary discipline. The desert fathers were famous for their meager diets,

and early monastic rules were codifying this practice in moderated form. The major rule for monasteries in the West, St. Benedict's Rule, prohibited healthy adults from eating the flesh of four-footed animals. It also limited the number of meals that could be taken in a day and the range of choices at a single meal.

This ban on what we today call red meat points to a Christian tradition different from that of Augustine, one in which food choices express spiritual devotion and identify people as part of a faith community. It also shows how, through avoiding the food typically thought of as high-status food, Christians may resist the networks of oppression which such food symbolizes and on which it depends. To eat meat frequently requires significant quantities of land, feed and water—either your own or those belonging to someone else, who might, on a good day, be paid a fair price for them. Worldwide, animals farmed for meat generate more pollution than motor vehicles and consume vast quantities of food while elsewhere people are going hungry.

Benedict saw lack of dietary discipline as a sign not of strength but of weakness. In particular, he restricted meat to children, the sick and the elderly. By eating meat unnecessarily, healthy adult members of his community would enjoy a level of luxury inappropriate to their calling. It must be remembered that Benedict expected monks to undertake manual labor as part of their daily routine, so he likely would not have been open to the idea that meat eating is essential to an active lifestyle.

The absence of food rules in modern Western Christianity is doubly curious given that a meal remains at the church's liturgical center. In the Eucharist, bread and wine are offered, shared and eaten. Yet the reality of everyday acts of eating has mostly been lost, subsumed under the Eucharist's multiple abstract theological meanings—penitence, fellowship, sharing, justice, feasting. Rules about specific foods are at best incidental.

What traces remain of a Christian spirituality shaped by food rules? One place to look is in monasteries, which often stress simple menus, local produce and communal dining. These practices point to an integration of faith and daily life from which many of us could learn. But even in many monasteries, including Benedictine houses, the key prohibition of red meat that was central to ancient monasticism is no longer observed. In these places, Augustine's contention that all food is permissible and even necessary seems to have gained a foothold.

Another place to look for traces of Christian dietary discipline is the shelf of your local supermarket. Breakfast cereals, peanut butter, wholemeal bread and crackers were among the products pioneered early in the 20th century to wean folks off the standard pork, beans and pie breakfast. Early brand names included Food of Eden, Golden Manna, and even Elijah's Manna, evoking imagery of victuals supplied providentially by God. But this use of explicit Christian images in marketing was met with protests.

The Kellogg brothers, who were Seventh-day Adventists, promoted with their cornflakes cereal the vision of Adventist leader Sister Ellen White, who preached about abstaining from meat and lard. John Harvey Kellogg was superintendent of the Adventists' Battle Creek Sanatorium, which each year welcomed thousands of guests for health treatments that were both spiritual and physical. His younger, business-minded brother put the sanatorium's tasty alternatives on breakfast tables across the country.

Critics often assert that the Kelloggs and other reformers of their generation were prudish about sex. They recycled perennial anxieties about a natural human activity and assumed that meat kindles lustful fires. But their concerns are better seen as part of a tradition of spirituality that pictures physical and spiritual health as linked, a tradition affirmed by figures like John Wesley.

In a sermon for the beginning of Lent, Wesley lists various grounds for fasting: a natural sense of affliction, sorrow or penitence, the limitation of sensual appetites (sexual and otherwise), self-chastisement and the aiding of prayer. He does not present these grounds as necessary reasons to fast, but as reasons why Christians choose to fast.

Wesley was not himself motivated by any strong desire to defend the traditional seasons or days of fasting. He saw diet as a personal matter, to be chosen in accordance with individual, spiritually formed priorities. He thus heralded the modern attitude that emphasizes diet as a free choice. But he read early Christian writers and was steeped in scripture, and so he also points us back to a time when diet was far more central to spirituality. Diet impresses on people's bodies their Christian beliefs in ways that deserve to be rediscovered.

By fasting, Christians may be drawn into a rich biblical tradition of controlling diet for spiritual ends. Jesus and John the Baptist fasted, and so did numerous Old Testament

figures. Traditionally, Christian fasting fell into particular times and seasons. By fasting during Advent and Lent, one experiences an absence that enables one to long physically for Christ's incarnation and resurrection. Fasting on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday commemorates, respectively, events in Holy Week—Judas's betrayal of Jesus, the crucifixion, and Jesus lying in the tomb—and offers a way to share in key moments of Jesus' self-sacrifice. The eves of many saints' days were also fast days. Fasting before a key festival can help prepare us for the celebration to follow.

Fasting is not an all-or-nothing matter. Traditionally, fasting did not require abstention from all foods. People abstained from certain foods on particular days. Today we might adapt traditional practices by, for example, eating food from producers that promote social good, such as fair trade. The key point is to use our food practices for the good of our communities and to develop our connection to God.

By attending to the sources of our food and buying locally, we affirm the God-given network of social and ecological relationships in which we live. Attending to this network was natural in the days before mass food production and transportation. Now this connection needs to be recovered actively. By obtaining one specific item from a particular local supplier, we are more likely to feel personal gratitude in buying, preparing and eating it than if we drive to the supermarket and fill the car with goods.

In ways such as these, we may use food as a means of reconnecting to our spiritual heritage and traditions and marking the Christian calendar and the seasonal calendar—which is itself God-given. We may enter more fully into the life of Christ, the doctrines about him and his sacrifices made for us. This discipline is in sharp contrast to the pick-and-mix spirituality widespread today, in which we cater to our immediate wishes. By encountering unfamiliar or forgotten traditions, we allow ourselves to be challenged and we learn something. To take abstention seriously is also to challenge the logic of consumption. Food rules and taboos, even bizarre ones, help us to affirm an alternative logic of thankfulness. If we have enough to live on, why take more?

Furthermore, we might see the relationship between our Christian faith and other religions in a new light. Once we accept that food choices are an important part of our faith, practices in other religions will lead us to recognize truths about our own.

The seriousness of the Ramadan fast, for example, might put a lot of us to shame. But some of its origins can be traced to the strict Lenten fasting of Syrian Christians, which was admired by Muhammad.

Rules and taboos are, of course, part of our own biblical tradition, though typically brushed aside as being of purely historic interest. The first five books of the Old Testament include extensive surveys of permitted and forbidden foods based on habitat, physical features and preparation method. This logic is not always rational, but we should not expect perfect consistency. Israelite food practices, like modern food practices, were governed by a mix of factors, including cosmology, geography, symbolism, hygiene and morality. These combined to form a rich wisdom that situated religion squarely in daily life.

Modern Christians, in contrast, are in danger of slipping into a fast-food mentality: speed, convenience and illusory abundance rule, regardless of the consequences for the planet. It is as if we are stuck in an Exodus moment, with no time to wait for the bread to rise as we hurry to escape captivity. Our use of food to escape the places and communities in which God has placed us is our problem. How often do we look beyond the rushed or incidental meal to celebrate our own Passover Seder, pausing in prayer and fellowship to celebrate the abundance of the promised land into which God has already led us?

Complete agreement on the place of food in Christian spirituality is unlikely to emerge. Even the New Testament suggests different views. At the Council of Jerusalem, James affirmed some of the existing Jewish rules, whereas Paul is often taken as saying that all foods are clean to those who regard them as clean. This kind of debate is the stuff of everyday, practical spirituality. What is important is not agreeing on detail, but recognizing the link between food and spirituality and subjecting eating to the scrutiny of Christian conscience and tradition. By reflecting on the connections between food and spirituality and making concrete changes in our lives, we can do more to support the everyday, incarnated lives of our sisters and brothers.