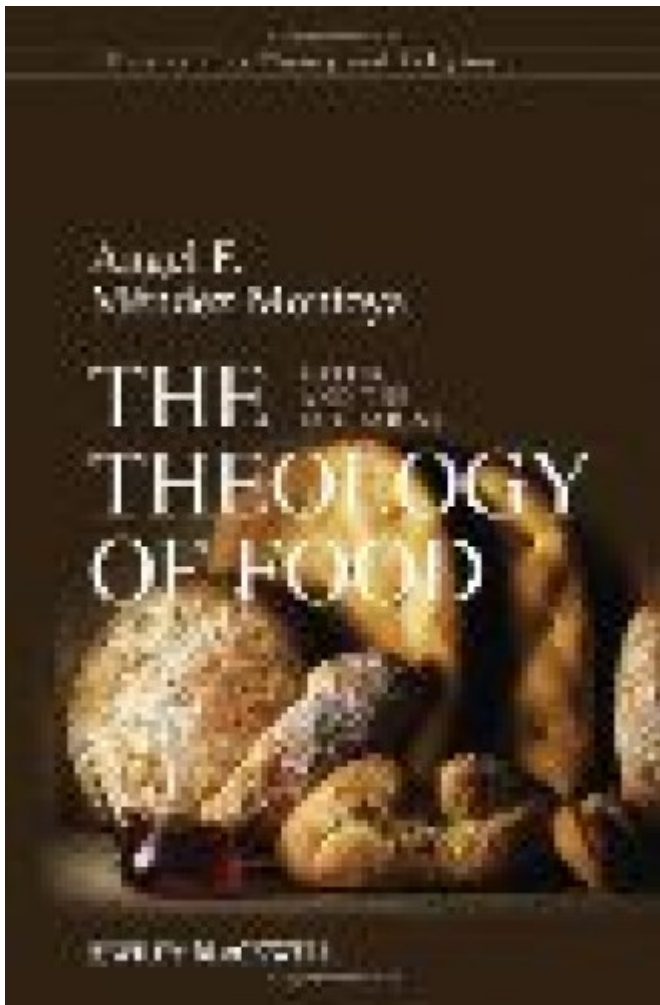


# The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist

Angel F. Méndez Montoya  
Wiley-Blackwell

No one makes molé to eat alone. That fact is central to Dominican monk Angel Méndez Montoya's creative and enlivening book, which begins with a friend's recipe for molé. The recipe lists 33 ingredients, each of which must be individually prepared before being ground into a paste and finally combined with still more ingredients to make a sauce. One bite of molé, Méndez contends, contains the entire world. And molé should always be eaten in communion with others, preferably in celebration.

For Méndez, molé is a metaphor for theology. Theology should be a process of nourishment that takes complex ingredients—"material and spiritual, individual and cultural, the body and the senses, meaning-making and desire"—and combines them into a whole. Like molé, theology should enliven and awaken us, leaving us more nourished and more ready to do God's work in the world.

Méndez's theology evokes a God with a desire for humanity so intense that God provides God's self as food for our nourishment. God's desire is also trinitarian, moving relationally in nurturing love and providing a "cosmic banquet," a cosmos of superabundance.

To present this "alimentary theology," Méndez develops a very specialized vocabulary that can be off-putting. I can hardly write this review without resorting to an abundance of quotation marks for all of the new terms that Méndez creates. This may be because theology and food are typically kept so far apart as realms of imaginative engagement that a special vocabulary must be developed to act as a bridge. Méndez is largely on his own as he attempts to create a theological understanding of food and to replace a theology of deprivation with a theology of abundance. At the same time, I would have appreciated a more common language to express the central significance of a common table.

While molé offers the introductory metaphor, the simpler meal of the Eucharist is at the heart of the book, just as it is at the heart of the Christian faith. When we taste the Eucharist, we taste and know God. Méndez points out that in Spanish "taste" (*sabor*) and "to know" (*saber*) come from the same root, as does *sapientia*, wisdom. Tasting is a very intimate form of knowing. Méndez calls this knowing "erotic/agapeic," and he is clear that *eros* and *agape* ought not to be understood as two separate kinds of love but are interconnected and lead to divine love. Eucharist is a material and spiritual "dynamic of desire": God's desire to share divinity with

humanity and humanity's desire for God.

Méndez's discussion of Eucharist is rooted in a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as transubstantiation, and I wonder how applicable his alimentary theology is beyond Catholicism. All Christians "taste" the Eucharist and thus "know" God in a similar way that does not seem to rely on a belief about the way in which bread and wine become the body and blood. At the same time, Méndez relies on transubstantiation to explain that the "visible moves into the invisible."

For Méndez, Eucharist is a playful movement between God and humanity, neither one being able to claim absolute ownership over the Eucharist itself, as it moves back and forth between them, uniting them. Perhaps, then, eucharistic theology also does not belong properly to one group or another, but its understandings and the kinds of knowing it produces are in flux.

While the particularly Catholic notion of transubstantiation seems to play a crucial role, Méndez's argument for the intense sharing of God with humanity seems to be an argument against an exclusionary eucharistic table. It would seem finicky and stingy of a God with so much to share to withhold nourishment from some in order to provide it to others. Yet Méndez leaves aside this sticky theological point. If an "open table" is the natural outcome of his theology, Méndez himself does not approach it.

He does, however, extend his analysis to consider many other ways of eating. Every meal, he says, is an opportunity to consider the theology of food, and all bread shared is God shared. Eating anything, from molé to Eucharist to "our daily bread," is an act imbued with both theological and political meaning. God offers us nourishment, even the nourishment of God's self, and then invites us to extend this gesture to others. Unlike other theologies in which God's gift can never be reciprocated, Méndez's posits a divine economy in which there is an implicit return in giving. The reciprocal gesture is never identical to the gift, and the gift can never be measured precisely, but in giving, God also receives. God's desire is both satisfied and ongoing. We are invited to participate in the divine economy by sharing our own daily bread and inviting others to the divine feast.

While we are called to feed others as we ourselves are fed, providing food for others is not enough. We must work for a sustainable economy of food for all. Only then will we approach the divine banquet. Méndez sets God's superabundance in stark

contrast to capitalism's idea of overabundance. In an economy of overabundance, desire is manipulated. There is always a need for more; nothing can ever finally satisfy. "Desire itself generates more desire in a perpetual and obsessive cycle."

In this economy, the reorientation of Eucharist is particularly important because it "disciplines desire toward God and toward making communion with one another." In other words, Eucharist trains us in sharing and in what Méndez calls a "complete act of feeding." In the complete act, God becomes food, we become God, God becomes us, and all gathered at the table become one with one another. As we become inextricably interrelated, we come into a physical and spiritual understanding of our proper place in the divine economy.

This is a timely book. As many in the United States are beginning to connect their eating with broader issues of social justice and global trade, a theology of food that takes politics and sustainability into account is welcome and needed. This book deserves to be widely read and, if you will forgive the metaphor, digested. But it likely will not be, for one simple reason. Hoping for library sales only, Wiley-Blackwell has priced the book at an absurd \$94.95. I recommend that you order the book through interlibrary loan and give a donation to your local library.