

Frontiers of food: Marmite, lutefisk, haggis

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

The Marmite centennial in Britain prompts me to develop a thesis: National or creedal groups tend to keep their boundaries strong by pretending to like foods that others find distasteful. Through long conditioning, members find it possible to tolerate the taste of their chosen food. But they delight in hearing the agonized comments of outsiders who have been forced or beguiled into eating it.

First example, Marmite. In the *New York Times* (January 24) Warren Hoge, alerting us to the centennial of Marmite, described it as “a brownish vegetable extract with a toxic odor, saline taste and an axle grease consistency that has somehow captivated the British.” They buy 24 million jars per year. “No foreigner has ever been known to like it,” Hoge states, and that adds to its iconic status. Mark Wearing says, “Our research shows that if you haven’t been exposed to it by the time you’re three, it’s unlikely you’ll like it.” So much for Anglicans.

Next, lutefisk. At an Internet site devoted to it, I read that reporting on the first bite is “a bit like describing passing a kidney stone to the uninitiated.” Some describe it as “nauseating sordid gunk,” “unimaginably horrific” and capable of inflicting “lasting psychological damage.” Lutefisk (not related to “Luthepisc,” a name for Lutheran-Episcopal full communion) is dried cod treated with lye.

I have faced this dish annually at the St. Olaf College Christmas Festival, and after 12 years am able to eat it. The Sons of Norway and various lodges and church groups hold rites to gorge on lutefisk in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, etc. So much for Lutherans.

Third, haggis. I have spoken at some Bobby Burns festivals (January 25) where Scots and their descendants gag at haggis and pretend that they enjoy it, while they at the same time pretend to understand the dialect in Burns’s poems being read concurrently. They surround their haggis with Cock-a-Leekie, Topsy Laird and Toastit Beef. The recipe starts with the requisite cow’s bladder or sheep’s stomach and

plenty of “organ meats.” So much for Presbyterians.

I can be an equal-opportunity anti-ecumenical despiser of the various loathsome celebratory foods proffered by these pretenders. Still, one can learn a lesson from them: Food can help create boundaries and distances in a world where identities are easily eroded. Some honest experts will tell you that Marmite, lutefisk and haggis are more needed in diasporas far from Britain, Scandinavia or Scotland than they are back in the old country.

Young generations of longtime immigrants do not so easily get conditioned to the tastes, and most do not acquire them. Could it be that those called “mainline Protestant” have seen some decline in loyalties precisely because they cannot erect boundaries? Successful Southern Baptists do have some foods that help them define themselves, as do many African-American Protestants, the Amish and Roma and other particular groups.

When I was co-directing the Fundamentalism Project, we dealt with caterers who wearied as they tried to satisfy the stipulations of Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Jains, Hindus, Buddhists and other particularists at our conferences. One meal-planner gasped, “I just love you Protestants. You’ll eat anything.”

No longer defined by their anti-Catholicism, not capable of drawing sharp boundaries between themselves and their more secular kin, they don’t keep anyone at a distance. If they could go back to defining themselves through Marmite, lutefisk and haggis, they might just alienate outsiders enough so that they could keep their own groups strong. But I don’t want to be around if they try it! As they say, “Stinks to high heaven!”