

“The Re-Enchantment of Nature across Disciplines: Critical Intersections of Science, Ethics, and Metaphysics“ (SSRNC-Conference, 17–20 Jan. 2008, Morelia, Mexico)

RELIGION, NATURE AND NUTRITION –

Religious constructions
of the proper diet



The conference panel seeks to evaluate interactions between religion and nature as mediated by ritual, legal, moral and mythic descriptions of the adequate food sustenance – including the re- or disenchantment of a "natural" basis of nutrition. The speakers examine historical examples from the history of religions as well as contemporary religious contexts and innovative spiritual options.

Panel Organization: Dr. Andreas Grünschloß (Göttingen) agruens@gwdg.de
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First Session: Reconsidering Traditional Ideals of Nutrition

– Chair: Prof. Dr. Andreas. Grünschloß –

1 Food for Thought – Chocolate, Religion and the Aztec Mind

Prof. Dr. Gordon Whittaker, Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Mesoamerican Studies, Univ. of Göttingen, Germany

The paper will explore the role of chocolate in the Aztec religious philosophy of the early 16th century. References in Aztec literature to cacao as a phenomenon of the natural world and to chocolate as a cultural product have received very little attention to date. In particular, the effect of chocolate on Aztec mood swings appears contradictory. It will be argued that chocolate had a key role as a mood intensifier, analogous to the role of alcohol in Western society, but restricted in use to the elite and to certain highly ritualized contexts. It invoked exuberance in ritual warfare, celebrated happiness within a circle of friends, but accompanied depression when contemplating the meaning of life. Data gained from recent scientific studies of the properties of cacao and of the effects of cacao on the brain provide important insights into Aztec thought, helping to clarify these relationships.

2 Immortality Is Perfectly Natural: Correlating Daoist Diets and Extreme Health

Prof. Dr. Shawn Arthur, Assistant Professor of Philosophy & Religion
Appalachian State University, USA

Ancient Chinese Daoists idealized the physical body to such a degree that many actively sought the permanent existence of immortality. Critiquing scholarship that focuses on seemingly 'supernatural' aspects, this paper provides a new interpretation of Daoist self-cultivation ideals as based upon a 'natural' continuum of interrelated medical and religious theories and techniques. Close analysis of early medieval Daoist texts indicates that practitioners adopted ascetic dietary regimens – which combine specific meditations and herbal ingredients in lieu of normal foods – in order to perfect their health, to obtain hyper-normal abilities, to divinize their bodies, and to lengthen life beyond normal constraints. I argue that Daoists considered their extraordinary claims to be natural outcomes of their basic dietary practices which correlate the human body's energetic properties to attributes of specific herbs, cosmological principles, and Daoism's animist worldview.

3 How to Eat a Proper Diet and not Kill a Living Being – Buddhist Attitudes Towards Food and Animals

Prof. Dr. Max Deeg,

<< Abstract to follow shortly >>

4 Physical and Spiritual Renewal of Life: Religious Aspects of Persian Nowruz and its Natural Ingredients

Dr. Fritz Heinrich, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
(Religionswissenschaft), Univ. of Göttingen, Germany

One of the pivotal settings of Persian Nowruz is a table-cloth on a table or on a carpet on the floor, layed with the so-called "haft sin", i.e. seven pieces with a Persian name which has the character "sin" at its beginning: Sabze (scions of wheat and lentil), Samanu (a special kind of sweet dish made from wheat germ), Sir (garlic), Serke (vinegar), Sumac (rhus aromatica, a sort of spices), Sib (apple), senjed (Oleaster or Russian Silverberry). Furthermore, Sekke (coins), Sonbol (Hyacinth) and Sepand (Harmal) are added, as well as some goldfishes in a bowl of water, a piece of bread, decorated boiled eggs and the Diwan of Hafez, which is sometimes replaced by the Qur'an, the Avesta or the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi. These ingredients, the different activities, rituals and dishes during the 13 days of Nowruz, are interacting with the old, supposedly pre-Islamic tradition of the feast, and its meaning as still one of the most important festivities in the Iranian Culture. Together, they generate a special awareness of life at the beginning of the New Year. Particularly, under the circumstances of modern life in Iran as well as in the context of Western societies, the natural ingredients of Persian Nowruz and their symbolical contents are rediscovered and reinvented in order to improve the spiritual and physical health of the person.

5 "Water and Wine in Iranian Mysticism and Martyrology"

Dr. Eldad Pardo, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

One of the most powerful images in Iranian martyrology is the thirst endured by Imam Hussein's family in the battle of Karbala. The martyrs were denied access to the fresh waters of the Euphrates River contrasted with the scorching heat and the tears of blood as well as with the eternal springs of paradise. The suffering of the holy family is being reenacted by Iranian Shi'ites in passion plays and trance inducing rituals which often include self-flagellation and chest beating. Asceticism and self-denial are part of Iranian mysticism (*erfan*) but so is the indulgence, mainly symbolically, in forbidden pleasures and wine drinking featured by mystic poets.

Against this background, my paper will overview the role of water, wine and simple food in Iranian spiritual, religious and political discourse since the 1960s. Using cinema, poetry, novels and religious sermons, I will show how these symbols have been played out in the struggle to shape Iranian religious and societal consciousness: From simple food representing the happiness and authenticity of the poor in the 1960s, through the political-religious martyrology and human sacrifice of the 1970s and 1980s, to the emergence of simple "love of life" and rejection of senseless death in the 1990s. Water and wine, representing different kinds of consciousness, feature in the debate, which is often peppered with allusions to religious and secular poetry and mysticism from the past.

Second Meeting – Modern Religious Reconstructions of Food

– Chair: Prof. Dr. G. Whittaker –

6 From Adam to Slow Food: A Historical Sketch of Christian Re-Enchantments of Nature and Nutrition

Dr. Lynn Poland, Dept. of Religion, Davidson College, Davidson/NC, USA

The current and growing interest in non-industrial, locally produced food is an excellent example of the "re-enchantment of nature" that is the conference theme. While many, and perhaps most, participants in this movement—growers and consumers alike—are not overtly motivated by religion; there are religious dimensions to this "local food" movement. Most obvious is the fact that environmentalism—considering local and "slow" food as one of its subsets—has for many a spiritual dimension—a phenomenon written about by a number of recent authors. What is less obvious to contemporary participants in the return to "local food" is the long history in western culture that links Adam, gardener in Eden, to Christian motivations for the improvement of nature via agriculture and botanical and zoological gardens, to American reformers of diet like Kellogg. In the short time allotted I would touch on a few key moments in this history of influence, concluding with a contemporary example of a "Christian diet."

7 An Islamic Perspective Towards Diet and Conservation of Endangered Species

Fachruddin Majeri Mangunjaya, Conservation International (CI), Indonesia

Islamic Jurisprudence (Islamic *fiqh*) has stated the guidelines in food consumption and diet for its followers. A certain ethical standard is placed in the jurisprudence. Such standards are not consuming animals with fangs (carnivores). This paper will examine classical Islamic teaching and its implementation of Islamic jurisprudence as a standard of ethics for Islamic communities. In some areas of Indonesia this jurisprudence in food restriction have helped in protecting some endangered species — Islamic teachings forbade killing of certain animals (carnivores for instance). Any derivatives from these for-

bidden species can also be considered as a prohibition (*haram*). This derivative includes all by-products from the species itself and also any monetary outcome. Unfortunately these teachings are not in the mainstream, contemporary Islamic scholars and Muslims in general are not aware that buying and selling prohibited species will also yield prohibited monetary gains (funds that are *haram*).

8 "Fiat Lux" – the Quest for Higher Frequency and Lighter Substance: Enchantments of "Natural" Nutrition in a German Esoteric Community

Prof. Dr. Andreas Grünschloß, Professor of Religious Studies
(Religionswissenschaft), Univ. of Göttingen, Germany

Many new religious movements in the esoteric realm propagate special or "alternative" styles of nutrition as a prerequisite or support for the person's spiritual evolvment. The German/Swiss "Fiat Lux"-community with its main centers in the Southern Black Forest can serve as a contemporary example for such dietary constructions, since their spiritual quest for ascension, higher frequency and lighter substance is combined with regulating principles concerning the body and its "natural" nutrition. Uncooked, wholesome and raw food is consumed, for example, in order to cure the body from unhealthy inputs and to liberate the person from lower influences. The paper gives an introduction to the dietary constraints and practices in this community and analyzes them within the context of the shared outlook on spiritual liberation mediated through the revelations of the charismatic leader and channel "Uriella".

9 "Food for Peace": Interactions between Black Hebrew Religion, Nature and Nutrition

Shelley Elkayam, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

This paper discusses the interactions between nutrition and the religious vegetarian tradition of the Black Hebrew Community in Israel. The Black Hebrews believe to be the descendents of the lost tribes of Israel who escaped to Africa from the Romans about 2 millennia ago, sold to be slaves in America and enslaved there. Their way back to the Holy Land took them to Liberia in a symbolic Exodus celebrated until this very day as the "Royal Passover". They arrived to Israel at 1960 and were located at the city of Dimona in the Negev where they live since as a community with distinctive way of life according to a bio-evolution concept connecting morality, spirituality and vegan whole-mineral nutrition. Their diet has paramount importance. They drink no alcohol, but self produced wine. They avoid salt 3 days a week, avoid sugar 4 weeks a year followed by a week of Veganism in which only fresh and uncooked fruit, nuts, seeds, and vegetables are consumed. As in Judaism, a religion they follow all of its fasts mentioned in the Torah, food is most important, and the 3000 members of the community research and study Nutrition and bio-evolution as their religious way of life.

10 – Concluding Panel Discussion –

Status of panel plan as of September 11, 2007