Ethical Eating

The Bible is full of food stories, from the Garden of Eden to the Heavenly Banquet. Jewish tradition developed an elaborate dietary code to order daily food practices. The New Testament portrays an earthly messiah who cared about food because he cared about bodies. In Luke’s gospel, the infant Jesus is born in Bethlehem (“House of Bread”) and laid in a manger (animal feeding trough). According to John, Jesus’ first miracle was changing water to wine at a wedding feast in Cana. And in all four gospels, Jesus promotes a radical open eating program that upsets the authorities with his choice of dinner companions.

The early church began as a meal fellowship: Christians gathered around a table to remember Jesus’ last supper, his death and resurrection. Wherever house churches sprang up, dining rooms were expanded to hold larger tables for feeding the faithful and especially the poor. And at Paul’s prodding, Gentiles as well as Jews were included in this table fellowship. Yet Paul also attenuated Jewish dietary and purity laws for the sake of hospitality, Christian liberty, and accommodation of the gospel to diverse cultures. So from the outset, Christian tradition was thus bequeathed with an ambiguous legacy: food as central to the life of faith, and food as a morally indifferent thing (adiaphoron).

True, over the centuries the church commended feast days and fasting, and also condemned gluttony as the first of the “eight deadly thoughts” (revised by Gregory the Great as the “seven deadly sins”). Yet the very carnality of eating seemed to link humans to animals more than to angels in the hierarchy of being, more to earth than to heaven and things spiritual. For the majority of contemporary Christians, ethical eating would probably not make the top-ten list of “spiritual practices.” And thus the current irony: a religion centered in table fellowship is not providing adherents sufficient guidance and practical wisdom for what and how to eat.

Vital Questions

“What’s for dinner?” we wonder and worry. Given the unprecedented buffet of food options in this land, how do we eat ethically and responsibly? Not only for personal health, but for the well-being of other creatures and for the sake of the earth itself? And how can breaking bread with others extend welcome and be a source of mutual delight rather than guilt and anxiety?
These are vital questions for every Christian congregation, every faith community constituted as a table fellowship. Moreover, as liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop maintains, these are vital questions for pastors and other diakonoi, the assembly’s designated table servers: “Pastors are called to care about food: good food, shared food, honest food, beautiful food, the sources of food, the limits of food, those hungry for food, the earth that makes food possible.” (The Pastor, 71).

A bevy of recent books can help church leaders care about food in deeper, more informed ways. Grounded in empirical research, these books have guided my own thinking about the complexities and politics of our national food economy. Additionally, several publications offer explicit theological insight regarding food matters. And with the release of Fast Food Nation, a fictional film based on Eric Schlosser’s 2001 bestselling expose’, it’s time to think critically and constructively about the way we eat.

**Food with a Face**

Schlosser’s book and film have created a buzz because they lift the veil on industrial food production in this country. Most of us now live at a great remove from the plants and animals we buy in processed form at the supermarket. If we actually witnessed how cows, pigs, and poultry are led to slaughter, Schlosser surmises, many of us would lose our appetite for meat altogether. Indeed, this call for transparency is a dominant theme in every recent food book. Though the food industry attempts to obfuscate and conceal, critics contend that we have a right to know how our food is produced.

In The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter, Peter Singer and Jim Mason pursue transparency by taking an in-depth look at the food practices of three families, which they classify as eaters of the Standard American Diet (with the fitting acronym SAD), conscientious omnivores, and vegans. The authors examine the ethical issues involved in the production process of the food items those three families chose to eat. They claim that only 14 of 87 corporations contacted were willing to assist with this project in any way.

Perhaps food producers were wary because Singer’s 1975 book Animal Liberation inspired the animal rights movement. Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University, laments that animal rights activists prefer to protest medical research, the fur industry, and circuses whereas the vast majority of animal suffering occurs within the
food industry. Singer doesn’t pontificate from an ivory tower. He teams with Mason to conduct first-hand field research, including a job on a turkey insemination crew. The authors last only one day in what they describe as “the hardest, fastest, dirtiest, most disgusting, worst-paid work we have ever done.”

The poultry and egg industries are given severe ethical scrutiny by Singer and Mason. This is their testimony: In a typical industrial chicken shed, each mature broiler is allotted as much space as a standard sheet of typing paper. Egg-laying hens get even less room, crammed into wire cages so small they never have room to stretch a wing. Because stressed hens tend to peck one another, producers routinely sear off the ends of their beaks. When their egg-laying capacity subsides, the birds are starved for up to two weeks until they molt, so they can then resume laying eggs for the final few months of their life.

Enjoy your omelet… if you still can after knowing the source of your eggs. Because transparency has its costs. Once we begin to see the hidden costs of food production, including the way animals are treated, we may find ourselves paying twice as much for a dozen eggs laid by a “cage-free chicken.”

Treating animals humanely is not sentimental or utopian. Throughout the European Union, for example, standards require that all hens have a place to perch, litter to scratch in, a nesting box to lay their eggs in, and about twice as much space as U.S. hens are granted; forced molting is illegal. A guiding ethical principle for animal husbandry is that all creatures should be allowed to express their characteristic form of life. Conversely, it is unethical to reduce creatures to mere “production units.”

“Food with a face.” That’s what journalist Michael Pollan advocates in The Omnivore’s Dilemma, a soulful book that unites aesthetic and ethical reasoning in examining the way we eat. Like Singer and Mason, Pollan traces the food chain of actual meals from earth to plate. Yet Pollan portrays four meals that he himself consumed, revealing his own moral deliberations and self-discovery along the way. This best-selling book has captured the imagination of the American reading public, and to salutary effect. As H. Richard Niebuhr reminds us, how we view the moral landscape is profoundly shaped by “the imaginations of our hearts.” Transforming practical reasoning requires truthful, adequate images, not simply a list of ethical injunctions.
**Corn and Oil**

Pollan sees two images driving our national food economy: corn and oil. If “you are what you eat,” then what we mostly are is corn. When biologists examine the carbon isotopes in a snip of our hair, we North Americans look like corn chips with legs. Corn is the raw material in most of the food we consume in this country. Each of us devours about 66 pounds of the stuff per year. In a Chicken McNugget, for example, 13 of 38 ingredients are derived from corn, including the corn-fed chicken itself.

Corn is the perfect industrial commodity; it can be broken down and reassembled in many different ways. And since a bushel of #2 corn is so cheap – that’s 56 pounds of corn kernels at a buck fifty – it’s a great product for adding value. Turn four cents worth of corn into high fructose corn syrup, add a liter of water and some fizz, and you can sell it for a dollar. That’s why Coca-Cola switched from cane syrup to corn syrup back in 1980. And every food manufacturer since has followed suit.

Corn is a greedy grass, however. Pollan dubs it “the SUV of plants” because it sips fossil fuel in the form of fertilizer. A lot of fossil fuel, at the rate of a gallon for every three-four bushels. Think of it this way: a full-grown, grain-fed steer has consumed nearly a barrel of oil (forty-two U.S. gallons). Leave it to technical rationality to convert a grass-eating ruminant into a fossil-fuel machine! Cows can’t digest corn and develop chronic stomachaches that require a massive dose of antibiotics. (Most of the antibiotics sold in the USA end up in animal feed.) And instead of leading animals to their food, we now bring the food to the animals, which requires even more fossil fuel. Then we have to transport the meat from centralized processing plants to our neighborhood grocery stores, and from the stores to our homes.

These are the hidden costs that don’t appear on your Happy Meal receipt: the long-term cost of using up non-renewable natural resources; the environmental impact of fertilizer run-off in our waterways; the dollar-per-bushel corn subsidy courtesy of the American taxpayer (benefiting not the farmers, but corn-processing companies that aspire to control food production from “farm gate to dinner plate”); the inhumane treatment of animals denied an opportunity to live according to their nature. Their nature, Pollan notes, has co-evolved with humans as a food-source for us. If we didn’t eat them,
domestic animals wouldn’t exist in such large numbers and might well go the way of the dodo bird. Or as one 19th-century thinker put it, “The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon.” (Pollan, 310)

**Industrial logic vs. the logic of nature**

Pollan worked for a week on an alternative farm near Charlottesville, Virginia. What makes Polyface Farm “alternative” is that it operates according to the logic of nature rather than the logic of industry. Joel Salatin is a grass farmer who choreographs a symbiotic symphony of animals and crops. Salatin layers one farm enterprise over another on the same base of land, describing what he does as the same “stacking” model God used in building nature. To read Pollan’s description of this pastoral rotation dance is to recall the majestic providence of Psalm 104, especially verse 14: “You cause grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for the people to use, to bring forth food from the earth.”

Industrial logic standardizes and simplifies; it reduces biodiversity to a small handful of chosen species for the sake of efficiency. “By contrast,” claims Pollan, “the efficiencies of natural systems flow from complexity and interdependence.” (214) In nature, for instance, birds follow herbivores, which is why Farmer Joel brings a flock of chickens to feed on grubs in a pasture precisely three days after the cows have grazed there. “In nature there is no such thing as a waste problem, since one creature’s waste becomes another creature’s lunch,” Pollan reminds us (214).

Polyface Farm has fiercely loyal customers. They’re willing to pay extra to get food from a place with a face and a taste. They’re willing to eat foods in season instead of demanding a year-round supply of every meat and vegetable. And they support this local farm because they believe in long-term, diversified, sustainable agriculture. Pollan calls this approach “pastoral organic” to distinguish it from “industrial organic.” Most organic foods come to us via the industrial food chain. These foods may be healthier for our bodies in the short run, yet they still incur many of the same hidden costs mentioned above. Even if you eat organic, the average food item has traveled 1,500 miles to get to your plate. It takes more energy to transport our food than we get from the food itself. No food so fossil-fuel intensive will have a future.
Reclaiming a local food economy

The Kitchen is a popular bistro in downtown Boulder, Colorado. The menu changes daily as seasonable foods become available. On the walls, large blackboards list the names of food suppliers for every item served (they also have a supplier map on their website). Local farms provide much of the fresh produce as well as dairy products and meat. The restaurant proudly promotes “eco practices” in every aspect of its service, down to the biodegradable napkins and drinking straws. Acutely attuned to its environmental footprint, The Kitchen even gets its electricity from wind power. In contrast to what food psychologist Brian Wansink has dubbed “mindless eating” (Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think), dining at The Kitchen is an experience of “mindful eating” and awareness of how one’s meal is situated within a tapestry of particular, interwoven relationships.

Boulder is not the only community to cultivate a growing interest in local food economies. In rural North Carolina, the Cedar Grove United Methodist Church extends its outreach ministry through the five-acre Anathoth Community Garden. The garden’s name was inspired by Jeremiah’s plot of land, which the prophet bought as a sign of hope and renewal. Fred Bahnson, who coordinates this ministry, reflects on how Black, white, and Latino Christians gather at Anathoth to work the fertile soil and enjoy the harvest: “We’re creating better homes and gardens as Jesus would have us do. We’re not recreating Eden. We’re simply looking forward to the New Heaven and New Earth, and aligning ourselves with that reality.” By sharing the Good News as they share fresh arugula, sweet potatoes, and snap beans, this Cedar Grove congregation extends the Lord’s Table beyond their sanctuary and into a hungry world.

In Champaign, Illinois, Community United Church has bought shares in a local CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Last summer the farm provided food for a communion service followed by a congregational feast on the grounds. This institutional alliance not only benefits the farm; fresh vegetables from these CSA shares are donated directly to two social service agencies for women. This congregation’s reflection on its food practices has been guided by Just Eating? Practicing Our Faith at the Table, a seven-week curricular resource designed by Advocate Health Care, Church World Service, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PCUSA).
The global food scene

Wendell Berry fans are familiar with his longstanding call for an agrarian ethic that critiques agribusiness and privileges sustainable, diverse, local food economies. At the very time the marketplace is urging us to “eat global,” Berry and his followers insist that food safety and security is grounded in regional food production. It’s highly unlikely, for instance, that one would contract e coli from spinach grown on a nearby organic farm. And yet, the global trend eschews the local in favor of distant and processed foods.

Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in Peter Menzel and Faith D’Aluisio’s Hungry Planet: What the World Eats. Menzel and D’Alusio, who in Material World brought us a photographic study of household stuff, now present portraits of what families from 24 different countries eat during the course of one week. These pictures speak volumes, as do the itemized grocery lists with costs tallied in U.S. dollars. While the amount of food assembled seems at times excessive—far more than the featured family could physically consume in seven days—the larger truth is evident in comparing those who have ample food access and security with those who do not. And what is striking about these food preferences is that as families become more affluent, they tend to eat much more meat, less fruit and vegetables, and more processed and fast foods. In other words, they eat more like North Americans. And increasingly, they become obese.

At the dawn of the new millennium, for the first time in human history, more people in the world were overfed than underfed. Millions still starve, of course, because of political exigencies (e.g., wars) and inequitable distribution. But not because of an inadequate world food supply; the world currently has a food surplus.

What supermarkets really sell

This global food glut now drives the aggressive advertising of food in every corner of the world. In What to Eat, nutritionist and consumer advocate Marion Nestle takes us on a guided tour through a typical American supermarket, that generally carries 30,000 to 40,000 products and “feels like minefield” with its overwhelming array of choices (Nestle, 4). Marketeers prey on our anxiety as they extol the virtues of personal choice, clambering over one another to get our attention, to get us to choose their product. “Choose me, I taste better!” “Choose me, I’m healthier!” “Choose me, I’ve got the coolest packaging!”
Nestle notes that supermarkets are no longer in the business of selling food; they make their money by selling real estate. Supermarkets sell the prime shelf space to the highest bidder, ensuring that this product gets eye-level placement as you stroll down the aisle. High-profit foods are placed at the end of the aisle, or by the cash register to encourage the impulse purchase. Check this out for yourself next time you’re in the store. Where are the healthy cereals? Way up high or down low. Where are the sugar-loaded cereals? Right at eye-level… for the children who nag their parents to death until a box of Captain Crunch lands in the cart. In some studies, market researchers concluded that the impact of “the nag factor” (aka “pester power”) contributes to almost half the sales of a target product. Nestle advises beleaguered parents to avoid the center aisles and refuse items that have long ingredient lists.

A long-time crusader on the issue of childhood obesity, Nestle has provoked the ire of the food industry for her unrelenting critique of junk foods, especially soft drinks. Nestle summarizes the basics of a good diet in ten simple words: “eat less, move more, eat lots of fruits and vegetables,” adding the coda “and go easy on junk foods.” It’s a challenge to “eat less” when the consumer economy urges us to “eat more,” and when nearly half the typical family’s food budget now goes for foods prepared and eaten outside the home, where plenteous portions abound.

Because our federal government subsidizes corn, soybeans, sugarcane, and sugar beets rather than fruit and vegetable production, consumers get a bigger caloric bang for the buck by buying junk foods instead of healthy, more costly alternatives. The 2006 elections are unlikely to shift the direction of national food policy, however, as newly elected congressional leaders will be eager to please constituent farmers who grow “commodities” rather than “crops” in those swing states. The 2007 Farm Bill, currently pending, will have wide-ranging, five-year impact on every facet of our food economy, from the price of a McDonald’s meal to the daily menu for our children’s school lunches.

**Food sharing as focal practice**

The obstacles to just and healthy eating seem formidable indeed. Yet Christian leaders can help persons develop practical wisdom for living faithfully in relation to food. The larger task at hand is to reclaim food sharing as a “focal practice,” to use philosopher Albert Borgmann’s term. When we reduce food to “body fuel” wolfed down on the run,
we alter the internal goods that come from preparing a meal and breaking bread with others. We begin to adopt an instrumental view of the world, a view that subverts authentic engagement, solidarity, and enjoyment. When we instead invest time and energy in cultivating a robust table life, we find ourselves living lives that are richer, deeper, more connected. Sharing food becomes a focal event, an activity that makes claims on us even as it summons us to larger purposes.

As with all ethical matters, Law threatens to overwhelm Gospel. So while keeping the big picture in mind, we need to go easy on ourselves and our companions—those with whom we literally share bread. Christians don’t need a new set of dietary and purity laws to follow. We need only to feast on grace, as we do when “we come to the hungry feast,” nourished by bread and cup blessed and given to all without price, regardless of merit. If “you are what you eat,” then what we are most profoundly is what we eat and drink at Jesus’ table of grace. More than corn or organic food or anything else we may eat, this meal sustains us for faithful life in this world as well as life in the world to come.

So like that ladle of mom’s homemade gravy that spills over the whole plate, covering everything, let our food sharing always and everywhere be smothered by grace.

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Steps Toward Ethical Eating:

- Demand transparency in how food is produced.
- Expose the “hidden costs” of food production, including costs imposed on workers and the environment.
- Promote biodiversity rather than monoculture.
- Oppose the inhumane treatment of domestic animals in our care.
- Partner with local food producers.
- Reflect on biblical stories and images that involve food.
- Recover our enjoyment of food as God’s good gift.
- Relate the Eucharistic Table to daily table life.
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Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think, by Brian Wansink (Bantam, 2006)


The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter, by Peter Singer and Jim Mason (Rodale, 2006)

What To Eat, by Marion Nestle (North Point Press, 2006)

Internet Resources

Bread for the World: www.bread.org

Church World Service: www.churchworldservice.org

Earth Ministry: www.earthministry.org

Eat Wild: www.eatwild.com

Equal Exchange: www.equalexchange.com

Heifer Project: www.heifer.org

Local Harvest: www.localharvest.org

Slow Food USA: www.slowfood.com