

**AND THEY ATE AND DRANK AND REJOICED BEFORE THE LORD**

by

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{ All beings are born of nourishment  
live of nourishment  
become nourishment for others  
turn into nourishment

(Taittiriya-Upanishad 3.2)

The title of this paper<sup>1</sup> and the upanishadic quotation immediately following it and used as a motto, seem to exhibit two different mentalities or types of experience. Every food is, by definition, "the food of life", so much so that certain main types of food (e.g., bread, water, wine) can also serve as metaphors for other dimensions (e.g., spiritual ones) of existence, whether as purely verbal metaphors or as concrete (e.g., ritual and liturgical) symbols. Thus bread can mean sustenance in general; water can signify existence, life, refreshment, purity, birth, rebirth; wine --as distinct from water-- being a "transformed" because fermented liquid, can mean spiritual transformation. Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft, as Goethe put it. Symbolizing the very essence of life, it can be drunk (in some societies), as well as strictly tabooed (in others<sup>2</sup>). It can signify natural kinship as well as the creation of new "cultural" kinship (e.g., "blood-brotherhood"<sup>3</sup>).

In due course man's attitude to food became extremely complex and ambivalent, ranging from the praise of gluttony to the praise of ascetic mortification. As far back as we can retrace the history of mankind, it is characterized by the primacy of the need of food. The historian of culture will go one step further and also take into account the methods available for procuring food: gathering, small-~~game hunting, big-game hunting, gardening, herding, agriculture~~ and here we have already landed ourselves in the history of technology. ~~lithic cultures, the invention of the wheel, pottery, the plough, the domestication of animals, the various stages of the development~~

game hunting, big-game hunting, gardening, herding, agriculture — and here we have already landed ourselves in the history of technology: lithic cultures, the invention of the wheel, pottery, the plough, the domestication of animals, the various stages of the development of metallurgy and, above all, the mastery over fire --that instrument and symbol of human culture, not only in connection with metallurgy but, closer to our immediate theme, regarding the transition from "natural" eating ("the raw") to "cultural" eating ("the cooked"). It should suffice here to hint at, rather than fully expound, the meaning of the Greek myth of Prometheus.

Going one step further, the anthropologist will inevitably become a student of religion and enquire into man's conscious concerns arising out of the awareness of the inescapable necessity of living off the cosmos. Obviously our first ancestors did not yet possess a full awareness of the complexity of the chain of taking-and-giving. But some kind of awareness there must have been, as is evident from the rituals accompanying hunting, sowing, reaping, preparation of food and eating, as well as from the many myths telling about the origins of various vegetable and animal species and of their consumption by man. As this is not an Encyclopaedia of Food-Procuring Habits among Primitive Peoples, a random example must suffice here. Many North-American (half Eskimo) tribes believe in a mythical agreement with the "Lord of Animals" according to which they may hunt as many caribou as they need for life, but no more. Killing more may result in the staying away of the animal herds in subsequent years. A successful bear-hunt would end with the ritual treatment of the animal's skull --almost like an altar: tobacco ~~being~~ <sup>is</sup> stuffed into the nostrils and other ceremonies <sup>are performed</sup>. It was left to the white man in the 2nd half of the 19th century to destroy prairie-culture by destroying all buffalo-herds. Even if early man did not know about photosynthesis, he must have known that plants drew nourishment from the sun and the earth,

so that they, in their turn, could serve as nourishment for him and other animals. Every culture develops its specific taxonomy i.e., rules determining what classifications to apply to the natural as well as human and social world, for to exist is to distinguish. Members of the same species are usually considered "inedibles", and hence cannibalism always presents a special problem to anthropologists. Man was also aware of the fact that there were herbivorous and carnivorous animals, and that he belonged to both species. Some religious traditions would like man to be wholly herbivorous i.e., vegetarian (see below in the section on O.T. dietary laws). Man also knew that if he was careless or unlucky he could himself become the nourishment of beasts of prey. The awareness of the fact that unless special steps were taken (such as embalming, mummifying, certain sepulchral arrangements) man --usually buried in the earth-- is not only dust returning to dust but actually becoming the "food of worms", as many religious texts never tire of emphasizing, similarly bespeaks an awareness that everybody is destined to be part of the food-chain.

Whether and how carnivorous man evolved from herbivorous and/or carnivorous ancestors is the palaeontologist's problem and not ours. What matters to us is the fact that man, as we know him, is not a scavenging animal. Hence consumption of meat involves actual killing (hunting or slaughtering) or, in other words, violence and bloodshed. Here the student of religion gets his foot into the door, for at this point he cannot avoid raising the question of the relationship between meat-consumption and sacrifice -- a subject about which so much has been written that we cannot even attempt a summary. Sacrifice seems to be one of the most primordial activities of meat-consuming homo necans<sup>s</sup>. The element of ritual bloodshed renders the act of sacrifice different from other forms of offering gifts to the deities, especially as practiced in vegetarian religions (offering flowers,

fruit, incense). At any rate there ~~seems~~<sup>appears</sup> to be an intimate relationship between killing, sacrifice, and rituals of atonement, since the act of sacrifice as a ritual of atonement seems itself to be in need of atonement. In fact, there is no dearth of "myths of justification". There is, of course, also the other function of sacrifice as a sharing of food with the gods and thus creating human/divine communion. Incidentally, sacrifice as the sharing of a meal with the gods as a means of establishing communion is one of the exemplary mechanisms for creating reciprocity. Hesiod's account of the matter (with Prometheus trying to cheat the gods, and the all-knowing Zeus pretending to be taken in but then announcing the vengeful truth) is a standard example. The Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, itself a variation on the theme of the faithful feeding on their god, will not be discussed here except for pointing out that this theme has its counterpart in the practice of sacrificial offerings to appease and satisfy hungry gods or spirits. The food-chain can thus function in many directions. Occasionally piety might cause a man to re-insert himself directly and deliberately into the food-chain. This particular theme emerges in many Jataka tales as well as in the practice of some Buddhist monks <sup>wh</sup> ~~to~~ have their bodies neither cremated nor buried, but exposed in the forest where they would serve as food for other beings. Some Indian myths tell how the post-mortem peregrinations of souls takes them through various celestial spheres until they finally become rain, fructify seeds and become food, before --at a later stage-- they are reborn again. This is the difference between pitryana and devayana, and the upanishadic text serving as a motto to this essay belongs to this mythological context. According to some belief-systems souls can be re-incarnated in plants, fruit or animals. By being eaten by true and perfect saints, they achieve ultimate liberation and final escape not only from the food-chain but from the chain of existence. Here the food-chain is, in fact, a soteriological chain, the end <sub>of</sub> which is translation to the realm of ultimate salvation.

The ambivalence regarding the ingestion, but especially the enjoyment of food becomes less puzzling once we look at it as <sup>just</sup> one more instance of the ambivalence that characterizes much human existence and especially its most vital and fundamental aspects. Some religious traditions develop ascetic trends: food, like sex, may be necessary for the preservation of life and for survival, but should on no account be enjoyed -- least of all for their own sake. On the other hand food, like sex, dress and other necessities of life, can also be culturally stylized and ritualized to a high degree, and raised to levels of ever more sophisticated art in which aesthetic, social, and hedonistic elements intermingle. For reasons which do not concern us here, in the case of food these developments take place more overtly and in socially more determined ways. Mortification, on the other hand, can become a major religious and social value -- or even obsession -- from Japanese shugyo to Indian tapas to ancient and medieval Christian asceticism. Active suicide being condemned by most religions as an unforgivable sin, the only form of suicide countenanced in some traditions is starving oneself to death. On the other hand religion also has the character of (sometimes orgiastic) celebration, and many rituals and festivals allot a central place to the enjoyment of food and drink. There actually seems to be a rhythmic relationship between mortification and orgiastic celebration. A great deal can be learned in this respect from the liturgical formulae accompanying celebrations, as well as from an analysis of liturgical calendars and of the days and seasons singled out for celebrating, rejoicing and enjoying (or even getting drunk) on the one hand, and for fasting and abstinence on the other.

The ritualised character of "food behaviour", which goes far beyond the necessities of life, even far beyond the demands of sophisticated culinary taste (gastronomy) or of aesthetics (e.g. Japanese

food arrangement), may tempt the observer to speak of secularized rituals. I for one prefer to avoid such question-begging terminology, but it is certainly impossible to talk about food without taking into account --with more than ordinary amazement-- not only its "direct" and central ritual forms but also the secondary "spin-offs". Of course food --and shared meals in particular-- are standard exchange mechanisms without which social life is unthinkable. The mere mention of the name of Marcel Mauss dispenses me from the necessity of enlarging on the subject. But in addition to the "overt" functions of wedding banquets, death-vigil or post-funeral meals, state-dinners etc., there are also the covert mechanisms for imposing reciprocities. I am thinking here not only of the "prestige rating" of various dishes, of the prescribed sequence of menu-items and the like, but of what I would call "satellite phenomena" (or even satellite industries and occupations) growing up around food: table-linen, chinaware, pottery, cutlery making use of different metals and different types of artistic styles and ingenuity, and so on -- all these having their fixed social locus in accordance with the occasion. When do waiters wear white or coloured shirts, green, black or red waistcoats, black-tie or even white-tie dress and white gloves? Just imagine the unemployment and social dislocation that would result from a sudden ascetic abolition of gastronomy; chefs, pastry-cooks, headwaiters and waiters, people involved in the production of glassware, crockery, cutlery etc., not to speak of viticulture. Perhaps all this is not so much characteristic of food habits as such, as of the tendency of all cultural and behavioural areas to develop in autonomous ways to the point of hypertrophy.

Let us pass now from generalities to the analysis of one very specific example. Two decisive words, recurring ever so often in the foregoing, were the noun "culture" and the adjective "cultural". We probably do not go far wrong if we assume the "universe of perception" of most animal species, especially the lower ones, to be extremely limited. The environment is perceived in a simple dual division: edibles



and inedibles (and, as a corollary from this basic division, the further division into "hostile" and "non-hostile"). Man, on the other hand, invents viz. creates these distinctions. They are no longer natural data (or, to be more precise, natural data alone) but the results of acts of cultural creation. The anthropology of food has gathered much food for thought ("because it is good to think rather than good to eat")<sup>6</sup> on this subject. Suffice it here to mention the great and impressive multi-volume classic of our generation, C. Lévi-Strauss's Mythologiques, the first volume of which bears as its title a distinction already alluded to: "The Raw and the Cooked". Human societies evolve regulations not only when to eat, how to prepare food, with whom and in what manner to eat, but also to make distinctions (varying from one culture to another) as to what is permitted and prohibited, pure and impure, <sup>a</sup>tab<sub>2</sub>o<sub>2</sub>od and non-tabood. Few Jews would shudder at the thought of eating pork as much as an Englishman shudders at the idea of eating horseflesh. Dog's meat a delicacy? Yes, in ancient China. Practicing Buddhists in many Theravada countries who do, in fact, eat meat (for although they would not kill a mosquito, let alone slaughter an animal, once the animal is dead anyhow --because slaughtered by a Muslim or Christian butcher-- there is no reason not to eat an animal that cannot be revived), would be very strict in maintaining the distinction between fermented (and hence forbidden) and non-fermented (i.e., permitted) liquid. Beer, let alone stronger drink, is out; fruit-juice, 7-up and coca-cola are in. Non-vegetarian (i.e., low-caste) Hindus will eat meat but balk at the meat of cows or beef. So-called "totemistic" societies make other distinctions.

As has been observed earlier, it is impossible in the purview of one paper to discuss and compare several culture-conditioned food regulations, and hence one example must suffice, provided it be understood that the same type of analysis could be applied to ever so many

other cases. The dietary laws enunciated in the Old Testament (esp. Lev.11:1-30 and Deut.14:3-21) and elaborated in the Talmud, and still strictly observed by practicing Jews, are among the best-known instances. The distinction is known to most people as that between kasher (in ashkenazic pronunciation "kosher", literally "fit" (in this case: for consumption)) and non-kosher (i.e. unfit for eating) food. The criteria for fitness as regards quadrupeds are double: cloven hoofs and chewing the cud. Please note that of these two criteria one is anatomical, the other physiological, but they are complementary and, as we shall see, both media convey the same message. As regards fish, the criteria are scales and fins (only these two make a real "fish"; hence e.g., eels are not kosher). Concerning birds the Bible seems unable to formulate general criteria and therefore simply lists the "forbidden" species.

To understand these distinctions one has to see the problem of food and the underlying cosmic "taxonomy" in the wider Biblical perspective.<sup>7</sup> God created the world in six days i.e., in accordance with a certain conception of sequence and order (Gen. chaps. 1 and 2) which insists that every species was created "according to its kind". Mixing i.e., confounding diverse kinds <sup>is prohibited</sup> because it interferes, as it were, with the order of creation and destroys it. This, incidentally, also accounts for such later biblical prohibitions as ploughing with an ox and a donkey yoked together, mating different animals or producing hybrid crops, or wearing cloth woven of flax (vegetable material) and wool (animal product). All these actions would be mixing species that according to the order of creation should be distinct "each according to its kind".<sup>8</sup> The account of creation in Gen.1 explicitly correlates space (above - below) with types of animal species: birds flying in the heaven, animals walking (or creeping) on the earth, and the "fish in the water". Hence <sup>also</sup> the three main groups in the lists in Lev.11 and

Deut.14.

The Genesis account of creation envisages a vegetarian world: "Behold I give you all the herb that bears seed, and all trees that produce fruit bearing seed. This shall be your nourishment. And to all wild animals of the fields, to all birds and to all that moveth upon earth and has the breath of life, I give all green herb for food" (Gen.1:29). Bloodshed, whether by man or by animal, will be avenged by God. In other words, the Genesis account of creation --in sovereign naiveté or equally sovereign sophistication-- pretends to ignore the fact that among the species peopling creation there are also beasts of prey, vultures and killer fish. Food, so we are told, both for animals and for man, is the fruit of the tree and all the "herb that covers the earth".

Act 2: Humanity and the world have become corrupt (Gen.6:5-7), and "all the earth is full of violence" (Gen.6:13) to the point that God regrets his creation and decides to destroy it, with the exception of the righteous Noah and representatives of each species so as to make a new beginning possible. But this new beginning, in biblical language/ "new covenant", introduces a decisive new permissive change: "Everything that moveth and liveth shall (henceforth) serve as food for you, as (formerly) the green herb I give it to you" (Gen:9:3). In other words, animal food is now permitted, like hitherto fruit and herbs only, with the exception of blood which is the very essence of life ("the soul") and hence belongs to God alone.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally this injunction against consuming blood is repeated several times in other books of the Pentateuch with special stringency as regards Israel, the chosen people. For now we come to Act 3. Out of the mass of humanity, one group, Abraham and his seed, is lifted out for the special calling to be a holy people and to live with God under a special

covenant.<sup>10</sup> This covenant and vocation to holiness evidently imply, in addition to a host of other moral and ritual injunctions, also a special food-relation to creation i.e., a special dietary régime. This is the background of the laws specified in Lev. and Deut., for these laws are deemed essential if Israel is to fulfil its calling and not to walk in the abominations of the people whom God had dispossessed in order to give their land to Abraham's seed. "I am Yahweh your God, who has set you apart from the (other) nations. Therefore you should distinguish between the pure and the impure quadrupeds, between pure and impure birds, and do not pollute yourself ~~by~~<sup>with</sup> quadrupeds and birds and anything else that moveth upon the earth and which I have separated from you as being impure. Ye shall be holy unto me, because I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations in order that ye be mine" (Lev.20:24-6)

What then is the nature and signification of this legislation? As has been remarked before, there is a strict division between animals of the air, earth and water. Each species must answer to very precise taxonomic specifications "of its kind". Those who do not answer to the required specifications are "impure" viz. "unfit" because they belong to some unclassifiable limbo. E.g., animals that have wings but most of the time creep or hop on the earth are not really "birds of the sky" and hence are "unfit". The case of amphibians is similar. In fact, water-animals that have neither scales nor fins do not answer to the "ideal type" of "fish of the sea", and are therefore prohibited. The list of forbidden birds, if carefully scrutinized, makes it clear that they are either vultures or scavengers. (We do not have to discuss here the ornithological knowledge of the biblical authors).

The provisions regarding "the beasts of the earth" are the most interesting. Chewing the cud is the characteristic par excellence of

herbivorous i.e., vegetarian animals. To this physiological criterion an anatomical one is added: an animal with cloven hoofs cannot seize, hold, let alone catch, prey, in spite of the fact that cloven hoofs come nearer to claws than simple hoofs. In other words: the order of creation (vegetarian) which had to be modified because of human degeneracy and corruption, and for which a second covenant, the "covenant of Noah" was substituted, is at least partly re-established now, in the dispensation of the Holy People -- until the time when the lion will again lie do<sup>T</sup>wn with the lamb. Meanwhile God's holy people is not held to vegetarianism. They can eat meat, and indeed must do so, since the obligatory sacrificial ritual in most cases required that the sacrifice be shared between God (in the form of the parts burned on the altar and rising as smoke), the priests, and the sacrificer. But the meat they consume, either in a sacrificial context or in a purely scular way, must be that of vegetarian animals.

Applying the Lévi-Straussian type of analysis, much more could be said on our subject. Why, <sup>for instance,</sup> is honey (a self-fermenting product) forbidden on the Lord's Altar, but salt (which inhibits all fermentation -- not only the corrupting rot but also la pourriture noble) required on the altar with every sacrifice? Why must the Passover Lamb be eaten neither raw (state of nature) nor cooked (i.e., made edible <sup>by</sup> <sup>an</sup> intermediary agent, <sup>i.e.,</sup> boiling water, and in a "cultural" i.e., man-made implement, a pot, but roasted on a live fire (Exodus 12:9)? There is no end to the questions that could be asked. //

Enough has been said, by concentrating on one example only, to show how the choice, preparation and ingestion of food is not a neutral act dictated by physical constraints only, but a cultural act heavily

charged --one would almost say overdetermined-- with meanings, often implicit in their structure and never clearly spelled out. The same type of analysis should be applied to the dietary laws and customs of other societies. <sup>But</sup> <sub>L</sub> The requirements, and the moral demands and sensibilities, which our age has imposed upon us, <sup>is</sup> may well mean that scholarly enquiry into traditional food-systems is no longer enough. We may have to develop our own new, relevant and meaningful codes.

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NOTES

1. The title of this paper has a deliberately intended Old Testament ring but is not a verbatim quotation. It is a conflation of several passages. i Chron.29:22 tells us that at Solomon's ascension to the throne of his father David, the children of Israel "did eat and drink before the Lord... with great gladness". Eating and drinking is not incompatible with what our jargon would call "mystical experience". During the theophany on Mount Sinai the Elders of Israel "saw God, and they did eat and drink" (Exodus 24:11). The exact opposite, to wit idolatrous-orgiastic experience, is reported in Ex.32:6. The people of Israel, after offering sacrifices of dubious character, "sat down to eat and drink, and then arose to make merry", dancing round the Golden Calf.

2. Cf. e.g., below, p.

3. A good essay on the subject is A.M.Hocart's "Blood-Brotherhood" in Hocart, The Life-Giving Myth, 1970 reprint, pp.185-189.

4. Cf. e.g., F.G.Speck, Naskapi, 1935 and A.E.Jensen, Mythos und Kult bei Naturvölkern, 1951, p.167 f.

5. I have deliberately chosen this expression so as to direct the reader's attention to W.Burkert's important book with that title.

6. I am using here the celebrated phrase coined by C. Levi-Strauss in his discussion of totemism. In the original text this epigram was, of course, directed against Malinowski, but I am sure Prof. Lévi-Strauss would not object to its application here.

7. A great deal of nonsense has been written on the biblical dietary laws. The only serious contributions that need to be taken into consideration are Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, 1966 (also her "Deciphering a Meal" in Daedalus 101 (Winter 1972):61-81), and Jean Soler, "Sémiotique de la nourriture dans la Bible" in Annales 28 (1973): 943-955. It is characteristic of the parochialism of current Anglo-American anthropology that Soler's paper became internationally known only after the publication of an English version in 1979 (i.e., six years after the original publication). Although the discussions of Douglas and Soler exhibit many similarities, the following account closely follows Soler, whose analysis is more lucid, coherent and convincing. Needless to add that whereas an Old Testament scholar would (and should) look at his texts diachronically, our analysis also treats the diachronic account of the Bible in synchronic-structural fashion.
8. The thrice-repeated prohibition not to seethe a kid in its mother's milk (Ex.23:19, 34:36; Deut.14:21) seems to belong to the same category -- only this time it is a matter of not mixing generational relations rather than a mixing of "kinds". Cooking a kid in its mother's milk would, in that taxonomic perspective, amount to "culinary incest".
9. Gen.9:4-5; Numbers 35:33.
10. Ex.19:6; Lev.19:2.



11.

There are a few minor discrepancies and inconsistencies between the lists in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, as well as some problems regarding intermediary cases which, taxonomically, are "neither fish nor fowl" (e.g., <sup>or amphibians</sup> certain insects). But the present paper does not intend to give an exhaustive analysis of the Old Testament laws or to plagiarize the whole of Soler's article. It merely wishes to illustrate a point. For a close and detailed study the reader is referred to J.Soler's ~~article~~ paper.

12.

It is unnecessary in the present essay to enumerate and describe the contemporary situation and its significance for the food-chain: pollution (chemical, nuclear and otherwise), endangered species, topsoil erosion, insecticides and sprays, the gradual invasion of arable land by the desert, deforestation (not necessarily always by man but often also by animal herds e.g., elephants), indiscriminate hunting with new technology etc.

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