



Food and Spiritual Reflection: The Daoist Example

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ABSTRACT

The author contends that the importance of food as spiritual dispensation has been largely ignored in the Abrahamic religions and perhaps to a lesser extent within Hinduism and Buddhism. He argues that in Daoism, since the production and consumption of food constitutes an especially intimate relationship with the world into which humans are integrated, attention to these practices must be a significant aspect of spiritual reflection on how human lives may accord with the order of things, with the Way.

The neglect of food in religious thought

There are myriad ways in which eating and other food practices matter in relation to religious activities. Most religions have their dietary prohibitions, their rituals for preparing food, their days for feasting or fasting. But the relevance of these practices is primarily to religions considered as organised institutions, rather than to religions understood as spiritual, soteriological dispensations. The distinction between these two senses of 'religion' can be exaggerated, but it remains true that food prohibitions, rituals and so on, say more about ancient, local customs and taboos that institutional religions inherited, than about the doctrinal or spiritual content of those religions. The Christian Host is no exception, for while it is of immense spiritual significance for the faithful, the Eucharist is not an occasion for a meal – not a gastronomic event – for the wafer and wine, though ingested through the mouth, are not food and drink.

Food in relation to religion as spiritual dispensation has been largely ignored. In none of the Abrahamic religious traditions, for example, is there a sustained discourse on the place of food within an authentically religious life. The discourses on food that we do find in these and other religious traditions tend, moreover, to be bland and very general. They belong, for the most part, to a wider rhetoric of austerity in which gluttony, alongside sexual indulgence and other capitulations to physical desires are condemned as inconsistent with spiritual exercise. Typical of such rhetoric is Gregory of Sinai's 13th century lament:

'What shall I say about the belly, the queen of the passions? It has mastered me and I worship it as a slave ... this abettor of demons and dwelling-place of the passions. Through it we fall.'¹

¹ St Gregory of Sinai (1995), 'On Prayer', in *The Philokalia*, London: Faber & Faber, Vol. 4 p280



At one level, this relative neglect of eating and food-practices in the literature of spirituality is surprising for, as Michael Pollan reminds us, eating – which requires incorporating into oneself bits of the outside world – is perhaps ‘our most profound engagement with the natural world’.² As such, one would expect it to be an engagement prominent in religious reflection on people’s relationship to their world. On the other hand, there are salient features of traditional religious doctrines that make the neglect of eating less surprising. To begin with, there has been the tendency to postulate a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, with the welfare of the latter being treated, in consequence, as a matter unworthy of the concentrated attention to the soul paid by spiritual adepts. Second, as already indicated, eating tended to be assigned to the realm of the passions, as something always liable to descend into gluttony, which in turn encourages other vices, notably lust and sloth. To counteract these dangers and to remove food from the realm of the passions, eating should be regarded by the spiritually committed with indifference, as a rather annoying necessity. This message is not confined, incidentally, to Western religious traditions. At the time Gregory was lamenting his enslavement to ‘the queen of the passions’, the great Zen Buddhist abbot, Dōgen, was instructing his monks not to ‘concern themselves with what they ...eat. Just take what is there ... if it’s bad, eat it without distaste ... Eat [only] enough to avoid starving’.³

An exception to religious neglect: Daoism

Spiritual traditions in which eating and food figure as significant issues will need to be ones where no dualism is posited between soul and body and where physical desires are not peremptorily condemned as obstacles on the spiritual path. Certain tendencies in both Hinduism and Buddhism might qualify, and this would help to explain the attention paid to food – and not solely for dietary or medical reasons – in both the Ayurvedic texts and in Zen writings on the virtues of simple, but refined styles of eating and drinking. But the clearest example, perhaps, of a major spiritual tradition that meets these conditions, and in which the importance of food has always been acknowledged, is Daoism. For the Daoist, the mental is not a realm set apart from the physical: rather, it is characterized by a refinement of the very same energy that flows through all existence. Nor, in Daoism, is there a blanket criticism of physical desire: what matters is that our desires should accord with the Way (the *dao*) that is the source of, and holds sway over, all that there is.

Already in the early classics of Daoism – the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi* – there are more passages dedicated to agriculture, gardening and dining than one might expect in spiritually orientated texts. And in the later texts of the Daoist religious adepts, who drew inspiration from these classics, the focus on such matters becomes much more pronounced. It has been claimed that, for one of the most important of these religious thinkers, Ge Hong (4th Century CE), ‘ingestion [was] the key soteriological activity’. The thought behind the principle of ‘salvation by ingestion’ was not simply that, by eating sensibly, a person might ensure longevity, even immortality (a main Daoist ambition). The idea, too, in Ge Hong’s words, was that by eating what is pure, a person can ‘distance himself from the rottenness’ of the world.⁴ Not all Daoists went as far as Ge Hong in pinning salvation on ingestion, but for the whole Daoist tradition reflective appreciation of food belongs to a wider concern for a right spiritual alignment to the natural world. The Chinese garden and ‘fengshui’ attest to the same concern.

² Pollan, M. (2006) *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, London: Bloomsbury, p10

³ Dōgen (1971) *A Primer of Sōtō Zen*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press

⁴ Campany, R.F. (2001) ‘Ingesting the marvelous’, in: N. Girardot, J. Miller and Liu Xiaogan (Eds.) *Daoism and Ecology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp127, 131



The contemporary relevance of Daoism

Some of the preoccupations of religious Daoism – with alchemy and immortality, for example – are unlikely to figure in modern-day reflection on food practices. But the central thought indicated in the previous section is one from which we may today benefit. The thought is that, since the production and consumption of food constitutes an especially intimate relationship with the world into which humans are integrated, attention to these practices must be a significant aspect of spiritual reflection on how human lives may accord with the order of things, with the Way.

For several reasons, there is an urgency to such attention. Current methods of industrialised agriculture are environmentally unsustainable, so that human beings face the decision of whether to live in a world where food, like much else, is primarily synthetic. Industrialised agriculture, with its factory farms and other devices, is also the main culprit in what J.M. Coetzee calls the 'crime of stupefying proportions' humankind commits against animals.⁵ People must therefore decide if they want a world where other living beings are turned into mere stuff for them to consume. Finally, a feature of modern life in affluent countries is the demise of *cuisines*, in the sense of traditions and implicit rules that guide what, how, when, and with whom one eats. Some may find this demise liberating, but its main effect, as Pollan puts it, is to produce an 'anxiety of eating' among people now bereft of a sense of the place of food in their lives.⁶ This is a sense that spiritual reflection might help to retrieve.

There are, then, good grounds for taking seriously, in our contemporary context, the Daoist thought that reflection on food practices belongs to a wider meditation on our proper alignment to other creatures and to the world at large. It is interesting to observe, therefore, that some of the best recent writing on food has a distinctly Daoist tone. A good example is her chronicle of a year spent on a farm in which Rosie Boycott records her conviction that 'something' – a Way – orders and 'guides' the life of a person who is able to 'let go', and to 'let be'. It is, she continues, especially through growing food and gardening that people are best able to 'connect their lives' to this 'something bigger'.⁷

The reference here to gardens has particular resonance, for Daoists have sometimes been called 'the gardeners of the cosmos'. What is meant by this label is not simply that Daoists are concerned to cultivate and care for their natural environments. More importantly, it indicates the Daoist sense that human beings and the world are thoroughly co-dependent. Neither can exist in anything like the ways they do except in mutual relationship to one another. And it is a similar sense, of course, that is shared by the good gardener, who recognizes the interdependence of his or her work and the processes of the natural world. It is, then, in gardening – in 'growing one's own' and eating it – that a true alignment of human beings to the cosmos, and hence their accordance with the *dao*, is both practised and expressed in a peculiarly salient way. The attractive vision, here, is of gardening as a spiritual as much as a practical exercise. Or, better – and more in keeping with the Daoist perspective – it is an exercise where the distinction between spiritual and practical is elided.

Useful Reading

Anderson, E.N. (1988) *The Food of China*, New Haven: Yale University Press
Miller, J. (2003) *Daoism: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oneworld
Wing-Tsit Chang (Tr.) (1969) *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

⁵ Coetzee, J.M. (1999) *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p69

⁶ Op.cit., p295

⁷ Boycott, R. (2007) *Our Farm*, London: Bloomsbury, pp58-9