

You Are What You Don't Eat: Reflections David Freidenreich's *Foreigners and Their Food*
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Food scholarship has become hot in the academy in recent decades. Scholars—historians, sociologists, folklorists—have been looking at eating in cultures far and wide, analyzing food practices from the ridiculous to the sublime.² This popularity reflects the anthropological turn in much of the humanities, leading scholars to pay increasing attention to cultural practices previously taken for granted. It also may echo the increased prominence of “foodie” culture in the larger society. Like their peers, contemporary academics like to eat; their reflex is, as always, to analyze and theorize what they’re eating.

Scholars in religious studies have shared this interest in food. They have looked at church socials, food in religious communities, religion-shaped dietary practices, and ritual uses of food, among other topics.³ The anthropological turn of religion scholars often is defined as a focus on “lived religion.”⁴ A lot of this scholarship has been a dialogue with the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, who famously titled an essay “On Deciphering a Meal.”⁵ More crassly, much recent food work is an exegesis of the old saw, “You are what you eat.” In the case of David Freidenreich, that adage might be better stated, “You are what you don’t eat,” or better, “You are who you don’t eat with.”

Scholars have long recognized how food practices have strengthened communal self-definition, but Freidenreich makes a valuable contribution in showing us how that process played out in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even more importantly, he shows how the three Abrahamic faiths used food practices to define themselves against each other. The intersection of these faiths is an important new site of excavation for scholars in religious studies, and Freidenreich helps to lay out the excavation.

Freidenreich’s argument in the selected chapter is particularly important because it seems so counter-intuitive. Many Christians—especially American Protestants—believe that food restrictions are important only to Jews and other non-Christians. In Freidenreich’s telling, however, medieval Christians were obsessed with food-behavior boundaries exactly *because* their absence in Christianity was what distinguished Christians from Jews. Our lack of food rules, Christians declared, marks us as Christ-believers, not Jews. In this process, Freidenreich writes, Christians defined Judaism as anti-Christian, as Christianity’s mirror image. (112)

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²Note, for instance, the work of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, founded in 1985, and the journal *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, established in 2001.

³A few examples: Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (Palgrave, 2000); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (University of California Press, 2004); Etta M. Fadden and Martha L. Finch, eds., *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Ken Albala and Trudy Eden, eds., *Food and Faith in Christian Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁴David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁵Mary Douglas, “On Deciphering a Meal,” in *Implicit Meanings* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 260.

Freidenreich doesn't say this, but he effectively gives the evolution of food boundaries a key role in the development of anti-Semitism.

Early Christians, Freidenreich notes in a previous chapter, attempted to straddle the boundary between the Jewish and gentile community. (100) This straddling included a shared food code, including a prohibition of consuming blood. This code reflected Christianity and Judaism's shared status as minority—in some cases persecuted—religions. Once Christianity became the imperial religion, however, it sharply distinguished itself from Judaism, in part by adopting different dietary codes. Such boundary-drawing is an act of power. Dominant religions assert that dominance by anathematizing the food codes of minority religions.

Some Christians still obsess about the dangers and seductions of kosher. Unlike in the medieval era, these warnings come not from theologians but from popular Christianity. An anti-Semitic corner of the Internet sees contemporary kosher practices as a Jewish conspiracy to control—and raise the price of—food for all consumers. Like the medieval Christians of Freidenreich's narrative, these cyber-prophets warn Christians that perfidious Jews want to limit their freedom by controlling what they eat; like the church fathers, they are trying to save the dominant Christian community from the inroads of a minority faith. Reflecting the recent rise of anti-Islam hysteria, warnings of halal food are growing as well.⁶

Similar power dynamics most likely shaped another historical tension over religious food restrictions. From the founding of European colonies in North America through at least World War II, Protestant Christianity dominated the American religious scene, marginalizing the growing Catholic population. Anti-Catholic rhetoric from many (if not all) Protestants echoed Chrysostom's warnings about the seductions of Jewish ritual (cited by Freidenreich [122]). In the eyes of the Protestant establishment, Catholics—like medieval Jews—were idolatrous, trapped in legalism, and slaves to spectacle.

In popular Protestantism, one of Catholicism's most distinctive marks was the Friday fast—better known as the “fish on Friday” rule. Through Vatican II, American Catholics were expected to abstain from meat on Fridays; most ate fish instead. Many Protestants, smug in their claimed freedom from food codes, mocked Catholics for what they saw as legalism, calling them “mackerel snappers” or “fish-eaters.”⁷ As with Freidenreich's medieval Christians, members of the dominant faith defined a subordinate faith by its adherence to an evidently pointless food restriction.

Prejudice against religious food practices, it would seem, is always with us. It's worth noting that these American stories, however, involve popular religious prejudice rather than the rulings of church authorities. Meanwhile, the fish-focused mockery of Catholics has faded and the anti-kosher conspiracy theories are clearly voices from the shadowy margins, not Christian leaders. These facts suggest that establishing connections across traditional boundaries, a major goal of Freidenreich's project, is genuinely possible. (xi)

⁶You can find these sources by searching for “kosher scam” and “halal scam”—but I warn you, it isn't pretty.

⁷Michael P. Foley, *Why Do Catholics Eat Fish on Friday: The Catholic Origin to Just About Everything* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 152.