



Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women

Caroline Walker Bynum

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In the period between 1200 and 1500 in western Europe, a number of religious women gained widespread veneration and even canonization as saints for their extraordinary devotion to the Christian eucharist, supernatural multiplications of food and drink, and miracles of bodily manipulation, including stigmata and inedia (living without eating). The occurrence of such phenomena sheds much light on the nature of medieval society and medieval religion. It also forms a chapter in the history of women.

Previous scholars have occasionally noted the various phenomena in isolation from each other and have sometimes applied modern medical or psychological theories to them. Using materials based on saints' lives and the religious and mystical writings of medieval women and men, Caroline Walker Bynum uncovers the pattern lying behind these aspects of women's religiosity and behind the fascination men and women felt for such miracles and devotional practices. She argues that food lies at the heart of much of women's piety. Women renounced ordinary food through fasting in order to prepare for receiving extraordinary food in the eucharist. They also offered themselves as food in miracles of feeding and bodily manipulation.

Providing both functionalist and phenomenological explanations, Bynum explores the ways in which food practices enabled women to exert control within the family and to define their religious vocations. She also describes what women meant by seeing their own bodies and God's body as food and what men meant when they too associated women with food and flesh. The author's interpretation of women's piety offers a new view of the nature of medieval asceticism and, drawing upon both anthropology and feminist theory, she illuminates the distinctive features of women's use of symbols. Rejecting presentist interpretations of women as exploited or masochistic, she shows the power and creativity of women's writing and women's lives.

Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women Details

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Justinian says

2009-07 - Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women. Author: Caroline Walker Bynum. 300 pages. 1988

It took me almost two years to get through this book. I would pick it up, read some, set it down, think about it, read something it talked about and eventually come back to it and repeat the cycle.

This book challenged me and my feelings about certain aspects of my faith probably as much or more than the bulk of my seminary classes. In reality this book could easily be broken in to two books. One book about the role and imagery of food in the Christian religion or any religion for that matter. The other book would be about women in religion. In this context women in the Christian church. Granted that this book is about Roman Catholicism in the middle ages, yet issues of food eating, abstaining, imagery of women, hierarchy, spirituality etc apply not just to all Christian churches but to almost every religious tradition across the spectrum.

As to the first aspect, the issue of food in religious faith. Food, its meaning, purpose, and symbolism are an important issue in most religious systems. Food and faith can be looked at from a theological point of view which often provides a rationalized explanation for the various regimens of food. Food and faith can also be looked at from a physic – psychological point of view. The first point of view is usually where most people start and stop buttressing or attacking based on the rationalization and explanations about food. The second point of view though is much more interesting because the physical effects of say protein restriction or removal are universal on the human body and these effects can be shaped psychologically by faith. It is for many religious an uncomfortable topic of discussion because it breaks down uniqueness.

This book does an excellent job of explaining the development, motivations, and rationalization of food in the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages especially as it relates to women's spirituality and the male hierarchy's reaction to that spirituality. While not intentionally delving into the second point of view it does lead the reader to consider this aspect of food and faith by the detailed descriptions of the physical and mental process in the words of the women and their observers. While reactions to food and other forms of asceticism are universal physically and often psychologically we must be careful when looking at rational and motivation to avoid using modern clinical assignations. This book does a good job of minimizing these diagnoses's by seeking to constantly frame the context through the words and experience of the participants. It is an endlessly fascinating topic and there are entire university courses devoted to the issue of food and faith.

The second aspect of this book has the potential to makes religious readers, especially those of a conservative nature perhaps a bit squirmy. This issue is the issue of women in religion. What is documented in this book is the evolution of a distinctive spirituality as a reaction to evolution in the church itself. This of course led to reactions and further evolutions. The fault lines seem to have been set on spiritual authenticity, the role of the Eucharist and issues of authority. There was an increasing fervency in asceticism among women in direct contrast to a loosening of ascetic norms by the church as a whole. This is where the notion of food comes in to play.

In particular the type of fasting that was practiced. Fasting was a much talked about topic at seminary but

this book really made me think about fasting in a new and more spiritually mystic way. The introspection resulted not from the theological underpinnings and explanations of fasting but from the specifics of the practice. The practices of these women did not emphasize the personal aspects of fasting but rather the communal and alms aspect of fasting. This aspect is sorely missing in most theological or pastoral discussions about fasting. Food its preparation and intake was one of the few areas in society that women controlled and so it became a tool of expression and asceticism for these women. Their responses and actions are worthy of study and reflection. In certain aspects they are definitely worthy of emulation. They tapped into a trueness and practice which is sadly lacking in modern Christianity which tends towards an individualized focus.

Besides fasting there were discussion about feasting and the meaning of the Eucharist and the symbology which surrounds it. One of the interesting images was of the priest as mother who gives birth to God in the Eucharist. That was one of the images that stayed with me as I kept plodding through this book. Gender role and gender bending based on actions and role not on biology. There is an undercurrent of this throughout the text which challenges and surprises. It is worth the effort.

The book is a slow read due to the detail, the academic style of the writing and for me the need to go and read some of the referenced works. It is in the end a book well worth the time and effort.

Brenna says

For my thesis! This book blew my mind. CWB is truly a revolutionary within the Medievalist world.

Lynn Evans says

If I had to credit one experience for moving me toward research into medieval history, it would be that of reading this book. Bynum did not, in researching and writing this book, cover new sources. Much of what she worked with is available in edited and published accounts, and those who have even a little background in medieval women's spirituality will recognize the figures who appear in her text. What is extraordinary, though, is the way she progressively wove these disparate vita into one overarching theoretical framework while never losing track of the narrative progression of the tales she told. So few of us who write in the field can do that; simultaneously address the theory of the past while maintaining the stories that form our source material. From fabulously fasting saints to levitating nuns, the stories that fascinate are here, but they are grist for a larger mill - Bynum uses them to argue that, as women popularly (then and now) have a different attitude toward food, the use of food in popular devotion among women become a common thread linking together individuals such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and even Christina Mirabilis, among others. The use of extreme fasts became, for these women, not a gesture of self-abnegation, but an embrace of the body as a tool which could gain them glimpses into the divine mind. As vox dei - the voice of God - they would then bypass traditional male dominated religious hierarchies and, in many cases, become the most trusted advisers to bishops, kings, abbots, and princes. She quoted one observer who visited a convent known for physical self-mortification, who stated that he gloried in the sounds of whips hitting flesh, as the women used their bodies as a means to penetrate to another world. The western world had long identified women as body; these women embraced their bodies and used them as ambassadors to the divine. In their wake, they have left us magnificent accounts of supernatural interactions, typically described in orgiastic language where the soul melts at the touch of the holy bridegroom.

This book served me as a window into another way of thinking about the self and the body, a gateway if you will into a pre-Cartesian universe where body and mind are not separate entities, but intertwined in ways that are difficult to understand in our modern world. It's a brilliant read, and has held its position in the historical canon far better than most books in the field. Read it - you won't be sorry.

Elizabeth says

I love books where scholars take seriously the words and experiences of women. So of course I was going to swoon over this. Walker Bynum manages to corral a vast amount of fragmentary documentation into something resembling a coherent shape, while making a damn persuasive case that modern understanding of female religious experience and symbols ignores the social and cultural context of those experiences and symbols. I think she understates the extent, depth, and breadth of medieval misogyny, but that does not materially change the point that women managed to make themselves a religious world in which their needs were paramount.

Also, the epilogue, in which Walker Bynum briefly discusses some implications of her study on modern ideas about food, damn near made me cry.

Siria says

An extremely interesting and absorbing look at female religiosity and food in medieval western Europe from three angles: the religious meaning of food for women; the forms of medieval asceticism for them; and the significance of gender roles within religious experience. I agree with a lot of her conclusions, though not perhaps how she reaches them. I don't quite buy her final conclusion on male vs female use of symbolism, which seems too universalising for me, and her discussion of *anorexia nervosa* as we understand it has dated badly in the twenty years since the book was first published. Overall, though, I thought her point about viewing asceticism not as a flight out of the body, but further into it, was well made, particularly with regards to how we as moderns view medieval expressions/denial of sexuality. Scholarship in the field has built a lot on this since it was first written, but it is still worth the read to see what its origins are—though perhaps *not* if you have an aversion to tales of saints drinking pus or eating lice.

Wendy says

It's been a while since I read an academic (as opposed to popular) history book, so this took some work to get into. While most of my familiarity with the subject is a few decades old, this was published when I was in college.

I would have liked a bit more background on some of the persons and phenomena, but again I assumed that this was aimed at those more familiar with the field.

But even so I was able to follow most of what was discussed - the variety of ways that women (and by extension the men who interacted with and wrote about them) viewed their religious experiences based on the cultural assumptions and church teachings.

If you're willing to put in a bit of effort, this can provide a fascinating window into the experiences of women so unlike and yet like ourselves.

Edgard Aedo says

A very thorough examination of the role of food in medieval religious life - particularly with regard to women. Caroline Walker Bynum explores how medieval female saints employed fasting as a form of rebellion against societal norms, as well possible links to anorexia nervosa and bulimia. By exploring the beliefs and practices of an era long gone, her book also provides some insights for our own time.

Niamh Colbrook says

I have yet to read anything even remotely disappointing by Caroline Walker Bynum. Her analysis is historically and theologically profound, her writing clear, engaging and imaginative, and her mastery of primary sources enviable. Once again, I am struck by the ability of her work on such a specific aspect of history and culture to speak creatively to our current questions, fears, and longings.

Laura Hellsten says

Great work and important knowledge on the history of a lost female spirituality!

Chris says

Bynum's close re-reading of her texts, including several I'd read and more I'd never heard of, finds a previously overlooked common theme: Medieval women mystics can feed others; they can become food themselves; and they can eat, provided the food is also God. From there, she builds a multi-part, theoretically and theologically informed interpretation. If the masculine is culture/spirit and the feminine is nature/body, then Christ, in the Incarnation, is ipso facto fully feminine as well as masculine. The salvation of our flesh depends on identification with his feminine aspect. Thus, male and female mystics alike increasingly identified with his suffering—which was gendered for the men (who had to gender-switch to accomplish it) but not for the women. The result is, broadly, a less bifurcated symbolic universe for women. Their practice is not a matter of body- or world-hatred, but of full acceptance of their bodily capability (shades of Foucault on power as productive).

Even if the interpretation is a bit overcooked theoretically, the upshot is still an astonishing example of what history can do in the study of religion. I knew this was a study with wide influence—now I see what Amy Hollywood and Sarah Coakley are arguing about—but even decades later, you can see how it got to be a classic, and why its readers tend to nuance rather than dismiss its interpretive work.

AskHistorians says

While male scholastics were debating in Latin, holy women (and their male advisors) were using vernacular poetry and their own bodies to create an alternative model of saintliness. This book, which broke open the world of medieval religious women to modern audiences, features a great introduction to the roles of medieval women in the Church before focusing more specifically on what made a few standout women particularly holy--and why.

Amalie says

You don't have to be interested in history or in the history of the Catholic Church. Just the interest of the history of western mysticism or if you are just looking for something offbeat and interesting: This is an interesting book!

A famous modern interpretation of the behavior of religious medieval women is that all the female saints in that period presented the first known cases of anorexia nervosa; and psychologists have more theories like visions of Jesus or Virgin Mary are results of severe anorexia that might have been results visual or auditory hallucinations....well I'm not going to argue faith.

Caroline Bynum's book looks at women and food in a whole different way: How these women would have served as role models for Medieval women. Bynum identifies the reasons for this fasting as being, among other things, ways to get closer to God by imitating the lifestyle and suffering of Christ. The reason why especially women fasted was because food and their own bodies were the only things women had control over and through that control they could manipulate their surroundings.

However the confusion of this book was that "The Explanation", was disappointing and caused confusion. She draws parallels between modern eating disorders, and fasting in medieval women, even though stated her reluctance to make this connection in the introduction. So what is she trying to say?

Still the first part of the book is great. Recommend.

Petra says

This is definitely a good read for you if you want new point of view to women's life in the Middle Ages, especially centering around food and spirituality. Holy Feast and Holy Fast is definitely one of the most important and best written books I have read for university; even though it is for my thesis, I didn't want to stop reading it. Will be dipping in and out of it in the future while I write my undergraduate thesis. Definitely pick this up instead of Rudolph Bell's Holy Anorexia if you are interested in significance of food and fasting even though it is a bit longer. It was incredibly helpful, even if it was my second time around reading it.

Gayle Noble says

"In the period between 1200 and 1500 in western Europe, a number of religious women gained widespread

veneration and even canonization as saints for their extraordinary devotion to the Christian eucharist, supernatural multiplications of food and drink, and miracles of bodily manipulation, including stigmata and inedia (living without eating). The occurrence of such phenomena sheds much light on the nature of medieval society and medieval religion."

An absolutely fascinating look at the importance of food in the religious and secular life of medieval women. This book gives an insight into what may have been behind the phenomenon of 'holy anorexia'. The author comes to some surprising conclusions with regards to what is usually taught about medieval views of the female body. After reading this, I am looking forward to delving into this subject in more depth.

sarah rogan says

loved reading this for my women in the renaissance seminar for art history. disordered eating from women being unable to control their situations and instead turning to fasting because food is the one thing they can control. nurturing and feeding others and punishing themselves for their sins as far back as women saints and martyrs looking to jesus. that jesus is an idol to women more so than mary. the difference between anorexia and holy fasting. feeding men period blood for fidelity. starving themselves to death and only agreeing to eat if they no longer have to serve their partners sexually. so much interesting research into holy women.
