

New Religious Movements and Food

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ABSTRACT: This special issue of *Nova Religio* brings together four articles that examine particular intersections of new religious movements and food. Dan McKanan examines spiritual food practices within the loose network of spiritual movements associated with Anthroposophy, the turn of the century “spiritual science” developed by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) that continues to have resonance today. Susannah Crockford contributes an article on fasting traditions in the contemporary New Age movement, based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Sedona, Arizona. Dusty Hoesly writes on the countercultural California group the Brotherhood of the Sun, which operated a series of highly successful food businesses in the 1970s and 1980s, and which he situates within a tradition of mindful food production and consumption. Constance Elsbeg’s study of food practices and food entrepreneurship in Yogi Bhaijan’s (1929–2004) Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) movement uses the lens of food to examine the group’s growth, institutionalization, and subsequent struggles. This introduction contextualizes these four movements, and other new religious movements, in terms of their engagement with food, using the lenses of social, cultural, economic, and structural factors.

KEYWORDS: food, foodways, gastronomy, religious practice, praxis, countercuisine

The week that the final manuscript arrived in my inbox for this special themed issue of *Nova Religio*, a friend tagged me in a post on social media: “Last week I ran into the 12 Tribes bus and ate their cult soup. I thought of you.” Another friend replied, “The best way to a man’s eternal soul is through his stomach.” Not to put too much stock in social media, and certainly the term “cult soup” is not part of

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scholarly discourse, but my friends did capture a certain resonance between new religious movements and food. The original post referred to the Yellow Deli chain of restaurants—and now food trucks—institutions essential to the origin and development of the Twelve Tribes Messianic Community in the 1970s, and clearly still attracting interest today. As has been documented by Susan J. Palmer, the Yellow Delis and a related bakery were integral to the movement's early financial stability and eventual success.¹ Today, outsiders' first encounters with the Twelve Tribes is often still through the Yellow Delis or the group's related food businesses. Their success has not gone without notice. Anti-cult groups instigated a minor controversy when they revealed that the Twelve Tribes catered several events at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.² More recently, the popular online media hub *Vice* ran a review of the Yellow Deli entitled, "Visiting the Cafe That's So Good You Forget It's Run By a Cult."³

The example of the Twelve Tribes Messianic Community and the Yellow Deli points to an important fact: the histories and practices of many new religions intertwine with food, both inner-facing food practices within the group as well as outer-facing activities involving food. The former includes communal meals, food offerings, rituals or ceremonies involving food, dietary guidelines, farming practices, or new and alternative food cultures, called "foodways" by scholars. Outer-facing activities include the operation of restaurants or catering businesses, charitable food distribution, and the use of food for evangelistic purposes. There is hardly a new religion that does not engage food in one of these ways.

Of course, the members of older and more established religious groups also engage in many of the same religious food practices. This includes formal religious codes such as Jewish *kashrut* and Muslim *halal*, food offerings to deities or bodhisattvas such as those often found in Hinduism or Buddhism, or ritual food consumption, such as the Christian Eucharist. Numerous religious food folk traditions exist as well, such as holiday or lifecycle foods. A burgeoning field exists in the study of religion and food, in which scholars excavate the many food practices that exist in formal theological, textual manners, as well as more vernacular, lived religious, forms. Since food practices appear to be nearly universal within religions, one important question for scholars of new religious movements is whether the food practices within such groups differ in some fundamental ways from those of older religions, and if so, why.

This special issue brings together four articles that examine particular intersections of new religious movements and food. Three of the papers, those on Anthroposophy, the New Age, and the Brotherhood of the Sun, originated in a session held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 2015, co-sponsored by the New

Religious Movements, Religion and Food, and Western Esotericism program units. They cover groups originating in the late nineteenth through late twentieth century, but still active today. A fourth paper was added to this special issue, Constance Elsberg's article in the Sikhism-derived Happy Healthy Holy Organization, to expand the scope of coverage beyond those directly emerging from Western religious traditions. The four papers look at a diverse set of religious groups.

Dan McKanan examines spiritual food practices within the loose network of spiritual movements associated with Anthroposophy, the turn of the century "spiritual science" developed by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) that continues to have resonance today. McKanan argues that while the specific practices within this diffuse religious network differ, adherents share a sense of intentionality of spiritual eating and a dedication to individual spiritual freedom. As McKanan illustrates, Anthroposophy's many significant contributions to contemporary foodways, such as Biodynamic farming, community-supported agriculture, and the holistic eating encouraged by the popular cookbook *Nourishing Traditions*, reveal the diversity within Anthroposophical foodways. While internally diverse, intentional spiritual eating nevertheless unites these practices.

Susannah Crockford contributes an article on fasting traditions in the contemporary New Age movement, based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Sedona, Arizona. Like McKanan, Crockford finds that ideas about spiritual individualism function at the heart of New Age fasting. She argues that fasting not only reinforces spiritual individualism, but represents a way in which the practitioner can symbolically reject wider society and social norms and cleave to an alternative source of authority and spiritual practice. For these New Age practitioners, fasting is a declaration of spiritual independence. Yet Crockford argues that these fasters generally associate themselves with New Age gurus and follow fasting traditions promulgated by such gurus. Not only does this expose them for critique as "cult" members, but it means that their fasts symbolically shift them from allegiance to normative American foodways to those associated with these gurus.

Writing of the countercultural California group the Brotherhood of the Sun, which operated a series of highly successful food businesses in the 1970s and 1980s, Dusty Hoesly situates the group within what he calls a tradition of "mindful food production and consumption." Hoesly argues that this new religious movement, founded by Norman Paulsen (1929–2006) as a utopian experiment drawing on Christian, western esoteric, Asian, and New Age traditions, shaped the emerging organic food movement in California. The group operated a plethora of interests including Sunburst Farms, Sunburst Community Stores, Sunburst Natural Foods, and later New Frontiers markets. Hoesly demonstrates

that the group's spiritual practices found embodiment in their food practices, and that their pragmatic commercial enterprises cannot be separated from their utopian spiritual vision.

The final article, Constance Elsberg's study of food practices and food entrepreneurship in Yogi Bhanjan's (1929–2004) Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) movement, uses the lens of food to examine the group's growth, institutionalization, and subsequent struggles. She demonstrates how Bhanjan called for utilizing diet as part of a "technology" for living, alongside other religious practices. To that end, 3HO adherents embraced the founder's vision of South Asian Aryurvedic foodways. In doing so, they both incorporated and helped create the inchoate countercultural food movement, with its focus on whole grains and organic food. Yet their rejection of American foodways ironically also resulted in their development of a host of alternative industrial food manufactures and firms, including Golden Temple Conscious Cookery, Khalsa International Industries and Trades Companies, and most notably, Yogi Tea.

Several common themes emerge from these articles. First, all note how these movements helped spur the development of the health food industry, the California food scene, and the organic/natural food movement. Food studies scholar Warren J. Belasco has called these interlinked food movements a "countercuisine," since they run counter to what is envisioned as the "standard American diet."⁴ Many of the individuals involved in these new religious movements had direct or indirect connections to leaders in the countercuisine food movement, and even to particular countercuisine institutions such as the Source Restaurant, which was operated by California new religious movement the Source Family, and pioneered both vegan and health foods.⁵

Underlying these movements' connections to each other and to food practices are several additional commonalities, ones locatable within other new religious movements as well. Seen synoptically, one can chart four interlocking sets of factors that lead to the high level of engagement with food among new religious movements: social factors (food's place in the recruitment, socialization, and retention of members), cultural factors (the symbolic value of food), economic factors (food-related businesses), and structural factors related to the nature of emergent and alternative religious movements (alternative religious foodways).

On a social level, food functions within new religious movements to aid in the recruitment, socialization, and retention of members. Elsberg notes in her essay how converts to 3HO found the movement's foodways attractive, and how commune leaders identified group meals as fostering community and social bonding. Among other new religious movements, the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) provides another clear example of this style of engagement with food. In the group's early days in New

York City's Bowery and San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s, the movement's free food distribution served as one of its marketing hallmarks as well as attractions to the movement. Even today, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness are known for both their free public feasts held at their temples as well as free food distribution in public parks and other public locations. Numerous devotees have indicated that they first encountered ISKCON at these events, and often began attending because of the food.⁶

Within new religious movements, food practices often function to maintain cohesion and retain members. Communal meals provide occasions for formal and informal bonding. The Amana colonies, an Iowa-based communal group predicated on nineteenth-century German pietism, relied on these communal meals to maintain the group's cohesion even as other communal elements declined. As historian Jonathan G. Andelson argued, the termination of these communal meals coincided and likely contributed to the end of the movement's communal existence.⁷ One can also position the New Age fasting practices considered by Susannah Crockford as similarly serving a function of social cohesion, at least those that are undertaken in social groups.

From a cultural and even culinary perspective, new religious movements often engage food as a means of resacralizing ordinary life in contrast to what they envision as an instrumentalist and consumer-driven culture. Akin to other forms of re-enchantment, which as Christopher Partridge has noted is often key to the rise of new religious movements, these resacralized foodways transform food from a utilitarian product to one imbued with meaning.⁸ In this special issue, Dan McKanan's article shows how Anthroposophical thinkers developed multiple ways of doing so, with some embracing vegetarianism, others turning to diets high in animal products, and others focusing on connections to nature and the land. Each of the sub-movements within Anthroposophy sought to sacralize the production and consumption of food. Susannah Crockford's work similarly demonstrates how the New Age fasters see their practices as infusing their foodways with symbolic and spiritual meaning, in contradistinction to broader culture. Western foodways emerge as the foil for the fasting New Age adherents and members of many other new religious movements who reject the "standard American diet" and embrace alternative food cultures.

At times, this approach to food as a powerful cultural symbol became dominant. The Farm, the Tennessee communal group founded by Stephen Gaskin (1935–2014), centered on a rural, agrarian lifestyle, which communards believed served as a corrective to modern living.⁹ Members embraced what they considered a "natural" lifestyle based on living close to the land. The production and sharing of natural, wholesome, vegetarian food served a powerful (counter-) cultural symbol within the group. The communal banquets in the Peace Mission,

founded and led by Father Divine (c.1876–1965) and later Mother Divine (1925–2017) offer another example. As Leonard Norman Primiano has written, the group's banquets functioned as powerful symbols of abundance, interracial reconciliation, and self-respect during an era when the group's predominantly African American membership experienced little of this in the outside world.¹⁰

The Peace Mission's banquets functioned as central rituals within the community, not only reinforcing solidarity but serving an important role within the group's theology. Food serves similar religious functions within other new religious movements. For devotees within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the offering of food to Krishna and other divine beings represents one of the most important religious practices, alongside the subsequent sharing of the foodstuffs having been offered, the *prasadam*, within the community or to guests. Devotees believe that simply eating a bite of *prasadam* performs salvific work, possessing tremendous spiritual efficacy and power.¹¹ One finds similar food offerings among other movements, especially those emerging from the Hindu religious world or the Neo-Pagan one. Anthropologist Christopher Gillette has indicated that among Neo-Pagans identifying with the Norse pantheon, the production and offering of mead has become an important religious ritual.¹²

One cannot escape the clear economic factors at play in the engagement of new religious movements with food. Members of new religions need to eat, necessitating a draw on groups' funding, but at the same time, outsiders need to eat as well, leading to a potential source of revenue. The essays included in this collection by Hoesly and Elsberg explicate the manner in which the Brotherhood of the Sun and the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization employed food as means of economic stability and growth. The groups' food businesses not only developed from deep and meaningful ideas about the value of food, but also from entrepreneurial approaches to selling these in the marketplace of ideas. The Brotherhood of the Sun quite literally sold its model of holistic eating to California and then national consumers through its wholesale and retail food businesses. Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization's Yogi Tea brand and other food businesses did the same in terms of the group's commitment to its founder's vision of Aryurvedic foodways. As both authors note, one cannot separate the groups' religious teachings from these food businesses.

Other new religions similarly operated food-related businesses. The aforementioned Source Restaurant, founded by Father Yod (1922–1975), sometimes attracted new members to the Source Family, but it was far more useful to the group as a revenue stream.¹³ The sannyasins at Rajneesh Osho's (1931–1990) Oregon commune of Rajneeshpuram likewise operated a number of food-related businesses intended to keep the group financially afloat.¹⁴ In some cases, these food businesses

became so successful that they came to occupy the forefront of the work of members of the new religions. As McKanan notes in his essay, the San Francisco Zen Center's Tassajara Bakery and Greens restaurant were renowned not just in the counterculture, but broader California. Yet historian of religion Marion S. Goldman has noted how, in that particular case, questions of boundaries between religious devotion to the group's mission and the economic factors of working a job at their restaurant resulted in some members feeling that they had become employees as much as devotees.¹⁵ As Elsberg's article shows with the internecine conflicts within 3HO regarding its food businesses, Tassajara and Greens are far from exceptions.

Finally, there are important structural reasons within new religious movements for their engagements with food. Fundamentally, people attracted to alternative religions are often also attracted to alternative foodways, and those who seek to restructure society on religious grounds often wish to do the same with foodways. Nineteenth-century new religious movements provide ample evidence of this pattern, with Seventh-day Adventists, Shakers, and Mormons all serving as examples of movements that hoped to reshape the broader social order and employed new foodways as a means of doing so.¹⁶ Often such groups also called for alternatives to other social structures, such as marriage, sex, child-rearing, economic activity, and even political organization. The Nation of Islam offered to its adherents an alternative model of *halal* intended to reshape the foodways of African Americans and free them of both the corrupting food of the white man as well as the demeaning food of the slave.¹⁷ Similarly, contemporary Neopagans' propensity to become involved in a variety of alternative foodways, ranging from homesteading to brewing, reflects less on any theological tenet within Paganism than on the willingness of Neopagans to experiment with new and alternative lifestyle choices.

New religious movements display a rich variety of ways in which they engage food and eating. While this is undoubtedly true of other, older, and more culturally mainstream religions, among new religions food practices take on a particularly notable role. Because the adherents of new religions are generally converts to the traditions, food's social role in attracting and maintaining cohesion rises to the fore. Such groups also tend to offer culturally distinctive visions of meaning and practice, with food often taking on roles within those visions. The economics of needing to feed members, as well as those of operating food-related businesses, is also prominent in many new religions. Finally, new religious movements are by nature both new and alternative, which leads to a certain openness toward new and alternative foodways. The contributions to this special issue of *Nova Religio* demonstrate, in the four specific cases, the manner in which scholars must consider food and food-related practices in the study of new and alternative religions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Susan J. Palmer, “The Twelve Tribes: Preparing the Bride for Yahshua’s Return,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 3 (February 2010): 62.

² Tim Elliott, “Spare the Rod and Spoil the . . .,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March 2008, pg. 10.

³ Maddison Connaughton and James Courtney, “Visiting the Cafe That’s So Good You Forget it’s Run By a Cult,” *Vice*, 26 Sept. 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/nnkngd/visiting-the-cafe-thats-so-good-people-ignore-its-run-by-a-cult.

⁴ Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁵ For more on the Source Family, see the self-published book by their former internal archivists, Isis Aquarian and Electricity Aquarian, *The Source: The Untold Story of Father Yod, Ya Ho Wa 13 and The Source Family* (Los Angeles: Process, 2007).

⁶ Benjamin E. Zeller, “Food Practices, Culture, and Social Dynamics in the Hare Krishna Movement,” in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, eds. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 681–702.

⁷ Jonathan G. Andelson, “Food and Social Relations in Communal and Capitalist Amana,” in *Eating in Eden: Food & American Utopias*, eds. Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 143–161.

⁸ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁹ Douglas Stevenson, *Out to Change the World: The Evolution of The Farm Community* (Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 2014), 19–60.

¹⁰ Leonard Norman Primiano, “‘And as We Dine, We Sing and Praise God’: Father and Mother Divine’s Theologies of Food,” in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, eds. Benjamin E. Zeller, Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson, and Nora L. Rubel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 42–67.

¹¹ Graham Dwyer, “Krishna Prasadam: The Transformative Power of Sanctified Food in the Krishna Consciousness Movement,” *Religions of South Asia* 4, no. 1 (2010): 89–104.

¹² Christopher Gillette, “Wine and Cakes: Food, Power, and Ritual Relationships among Neo-Pagans,” *Crosscurrents: The Journal of Graduate Research in Anthropology* 7 (Autumn 1995): 89–95.

¹³ Aquarian and Aquarian, *The Source*.

¹⁴ Because of the explosive nature of the downfall of Rajneeshpuram, there has been little scholarly attention to the group’s lived practices. The best source on the group’s food businesses and practices is a primary source, their published cookbook, *Zorba the Buddha Rajneesh Cookbook* (Oregon: Rajneesh Foundation, 1984).

¹⁵ Marion S. Goldman, “Food, Faith and Fraud in Two New Religious Movements,” in *Minority Religions and Fraud: In Good Faith*, ed. Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist (London: Ashgate, 2014), 138–143.

¹⁶ See Jim E. Banta, Jerry W. Lee, Georgia Hodgkin, Zane Yi, Andrea Fanica, and Joan Sabate, “The Global Influence of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church on Diet,” *Religions* 9, no. 9 (2018): 1–25; Margaret Puskar-Pasewicz, “Kitchen Sisters and Disagreeable Boys: Debates over Meatless Diets in Nineteenth-Century Shaker Communities,” in Madden and Finch, *Eating in Eden*, 109–124; Kate Holbrook, “Good to Eat: Culinary Priorities in the Nation of Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” in Zeller, Dallam, Neilson, and Rubel, *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, 195–213.

¹⁷ Holbrook, “Good to Eat.”