

## Breaking Bread or Being Broken by Bread? How Climate Change is Reshaping the Modern Life of Food Production, the Human Body, and the Religious Practice of Shared Meals

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### ABSTRACT

Modern industrial food production creates climate changes. Conversely climate changes effect where, when, and how food is produced. The interplay between food production and climate changes has a profound effect on the human body. This paper will look at how food production and climate changes are creating food-related disabilities that complicate the religious practice of sharing meals together. Food consumption plays a vital role in climate change. As interest in green consumption and concerns over food sustainability increase the climate benefits, but as the climate becomes increasingly toxified the human body suffers. Various studies in the field of immunology have explored how the environmental food allergen nexus has played a role in autoimmune illnesses.

People welcome and enjoy the company of others, even divine company, through the practice of sharing a meal. Even though meal rituals are integral parts of human life they at times receive little reflection. The absence of reflection can cause communities to have dangerous food practices that adversely affect individuals with invisible food-related disabilities. These individuals during community meals may encounter certain foods which can result in mild to severe allergic reactions, including life-threatening anaphylaxis. The practice of sharing meals together plays a role not only in the hospitality and fellowship practices of religious communities, but also part in the sacramental rituals of many faiths. In the Christian faith, for example, it is believed that the presence and grace of God is offered to those who partake of the Eucharist. However, not all who gather are able to share that meal because the elements contain ingredients known to be dangerous for individuals with food-related disabilities. *How can the Church break bread without breaking bodies?* The answer to that question lies in the acquisition of ecological wisdom.

**Keywords:** Climate change; industrial food production; food-related disabilities; sharing meals;

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- 01 Introduction
- 02 Two Experiences of Individuals with Food-Related Disabilities
- 03 A Trialogue Between Climate Change, Modern Food Production, and the Human Body production
- 04 Food-Related Disabilities and the Religious Practice of Shared Meals
- 05 Concluding thoughts

## Introduction

The North American agrarian poet Wendell Berry once said, “To despise the ground is to despise its fruit; to despise its fruit is to despise its eaters” (Norman Wizba quoting Wendell Berry, 2002). There are many ways to explore climate change, and many disciplines which offer particular light on how the use and abuse of our planet affects climate change. At times proposals can make observations that are so sweeping in scope that the content and realism of their arguments get lost in the vastness of their assertions.

This paper rather than beginning with a generalized statement of how climate change relates to the study of divinity, will localize the effects of climate change in the human body in order to explore how climate change is complicating one specific religious practice, the practice of sharing meals. Experiences from both individuals and groups will be shared, because their bodies exemplify how climate change is complicating human life. Sharing experiences from individuals or communities is important because narrating human experiences can existentialize important ecological concerns that at times remain unconsidered because of philosophical and political barriers. Using the experiences as a point of experiential reference, the triologue between climate change, modern food production, and the human body will then be explored by looking at autoimmune diseases.

Food consumption plays a vital role in climate change. As interest in green consumption and concerns over food sustainability increase the general state of the climate can be improved by changes made. Conversely, as the climate becomes increasingly toxic the human body can suffer. Various studies in the field of immunology have explored how the environmental food allergen nexus plays a vital role in autoimmune illnesses (McMichael, et al., 2007). The human body can experience profound changes which are due at least in part to climate changes. Some of those changes have begun to create a need for new disability accommodations within educational institutions and religious communities.

The question of food-related disability accommodations within religious communities is of particular interest to this writer as a Divinity PhD student working in the area of practical theology. The latter part of this paper will look at the question: how can the church break bread without breaking bodies? The answer offered to that question will lie, at least in part, with the acquisition of ecological wisdom. This paper will close by noting that perhaps it will be at the table, the place where people share their most intimate reflections and deeply held convictions, that meaningful exchanges of ecological wisdom can be offered and received.

## Two Experiences of Individuals with Food-Related Disabilities

“As a parent, it is so difficult to see your children feel so excluded and afraid as they participate in Halloween and Easter celebrations. In ways these holidays are a snapshot into the food inclusion challenges my child faces daily in their school and in other play areas in our community. I just want other parents and kids to understand that my child’s body has invisible, yet very real differences and that by adopting certain food practices their differences will not prevent them from being included and befriended by other kids.” (Case study testimonies shared with this researcher, 2016-2017)

Parents with children that have Eosinophilic Esophagitis (also called EE), severe cases of Celiac disease, or life-threatening allergies regularly share experiences like this. Because of the lack of food-accommodations in public and religious spaces individuals can be negatively affected not only during large holidays but more regularly within smaller social events that include shared meals. The food-accommodation challenges they face can become more significant when they are forced to live within social structures that require shared meals.

The second experience of individuals with food-related disabilities took place within a university setting. In 2012 a very public crisis moment in a North American university over food-accommodations took place. This crises moment has begun to reshape the way food practices of colleges, universities, and public schools occur. The crises took place at Lesley University, a liberal arts college in Cambridge, Massachusetts that has a study body of about 10,000. Below is a summary of what took place,

On Dec. 20, 2012, Lesley entered into an agreement with the Department of Justice (DOJ) to settle a complaint filed three years earlier by a group of undergraduate students alleging that the university did not provide adequate foodservice for students who suffer from celiac disease or food allergies, even though students living on campus are required to purchase a meal plan. In taking up the complaint, the DOJ alleged that Lesley was in violation of Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). “Food allergies may constitute a disability under the ADA,” the settlement states....The explanation goes on to say: “Some individuals with food allergies have a disability as defined by the ADA—particularly those with more significant or severe responses to certain food. This would include individuals with celiac disease.” (Quotation from King, 2013; also see Plicka, 1999)

This case was the turning point in legally defining severe food allergies as food-related disabilities in the U.S.A. In the U.K. food-allergies were legally defined as a disability following the *Wheeldon vs Marstons* case in 2011 (Unison.org.uk, 2014). The Lesley University case by adopting the medical model of disability, expressed in the Americans with Disability Act, laid the groundwork for acknowledging the unique embodiment of individuals with life-threatening allergies (on models of disability see Berger, 2013).

The experiences of these students at Lesley University is important to share because the focus of the 2017 Granite Symposium where this paper was originally delivered was on the topic of how climate changes are being explored within academic disciplines in universities. Modern universities are facing new food-accommodation challenges. The challenges are due in part

to the growth of food-related disabilities which have been connected to climate changes and modern food production practices. Some immunologists have called this the environment food allergen nexus. Below this nexus will be explored as a triologue between climate change, modern food production practices, and the human body.

[A Triologue Between Climate Change, Modern Food Production, and the Human Body](#)  
Acknowledging that there is a triologue between climate change, modern food production, and the human body raises the stakes in ecological conversations. “Food is one of society’s key sensitivities to climate. A year of not enough or too much rainfall, a hot spell or cold snap at the wrong time, or extremes, like flooding and storms, can have a significant effect on local crop yields and livestock production” (Clark, 2012). Climate change has not only effected how modern food is produced, but modern food production practices have left their own effect on climate change. An example of this can be found in an article published in *The Lancet* journal. In speaking about the effects of modern food production on the climate and human health the authors note, “the world’s agricultural sector, especially livestock production, accounts for about a fifth of total greenhouse-gas emissions, thus contributing to climate change and its effects on health, including on regional food yields” (McMichael, et al., 2007). Together climate change and modern food production have unmistakable “effects on health.” Those effects can be seen in changing dietary choices and new nutritional challenges (Springmann, et al., 2016).

The effects of climate change and modern food production can be linked to the human body by observing how dietary choices have shifted and nutritional challenges have increased. They can also be explored by paying attention to the growth of autoimmune illnesses demonstrated in the increase of food allergies. This is an important area of connection to name because in the United States of America alone 50 million individuals have food allergies. According to the Center for Disease Control that number among children has doubled since 1997 (Benton and Sayes, 2017). Determining the causation of food allergies is complex, which is why the phrase environment food allergen nexus is helpful because it acknowledges that causation for allergies comes along many different lines. “Researchers know that the environment plays a role in the development of food allergies” (Benton and Sayes, 2017: p. 29), but they have yet to produce definitive studies on how that is the case. According to research undertaken by two researchers at Baylor University, Erin Nicole Benton and Christie Marie Sayes have concluded that, “Some possible roles the environment contributes to food allergies include: traffic pollution, animal exposure, farm environment, smoking, and air pollution” (Benton and Sayes, 2017: p. 29).

As the environment degrades severe food allergies will only increase (see the story of Cameron Liflander in Newman). With their increase new civil policies will need to be drafted and implemented to care for individuals with food-related disabilities. Other vital social institutions that are otherwise free of civil control, like places of worship, will also have to reconsider their food-related practices.

## Food-Related Disabilities and the Religious Practice of Shared Meals

Having a deep-seated concern for nature (often theologically redefined as 'creation') is a common feature of the doctrine of creation within Judeo-Christian traditions. Ellen F. Davis's thoughts are an example of this.

From a biblical perspective, being fully human means to know our place, in a double sense. First, we are to see ourselves within the created order—or, to use a venerable and expressive image, to see ourselves within the "great chain of being" —as uniquely powerful creatures whose lives are inextricably and completely linked with those of other creatures. Second, knowing our place means accepting that our lives depend on the physical integrity of the places we inhabit, on the health of water and soil and the countless communities of creatures with whom we share those places; in short, we depend on the health of natural systems. (Davis, 2009: p. 110)

Jewish and Christian theologians alike express a high value for creational stewardship and care, but what they often fail to do is to reflect on how climate changes are affecting the human body. As human bodies change the practice of hospitality is complicated, especially the role shared meals play in hospitality.

Many Christian theologians locate their understanding of the practice of hospitality in the life of Christ (Bebbington, 1989). Hans Boersma is an example of this, "On the cross and in the resurrection, God has shown himself to be a God of hospitality...human hospitality is underwritten by God's hospitality in Jesus Christ....The question facing Christian theology is what the divine welcome of strangers looks like" (Boersma, 2004: p. 27). That question takes on a particular shape when the practice of shared meals are considered. Who does the church expect to host as guests in the meals it shares? The foods a church shares express the kind of bodies that the religious community is aware of and anticipates are present. This is true not only in fellowship meals which are shared outside of the Sunday worship service, but also of the sacred meal served within the Sunday worship service.

In the Christian faith it is believed that the presence and grace of God is offered to those who partake of the Eucharist meal. Bread and wine are presented as either a symbolic representation of the body and blood of Christ, or his actual physical or mystical presence. The bread and wine used in the Eucharist keep the church rooted in the land and the climates that have produced them (Grummett, 2010). The Eucharist is an essential part of Christian worship (Lathrop, 2005). Through participating in the Eucharist the Christian communes with God, receives God's grace, and is prepared to share his or her life with others through the grace offered in the meal. But what if that sacred meal was not genuinely offered to all present because those who serve as hosts lack an understanding of the bodily differences present? Not all who gather are able to share that meal because the elements may contain gluten, dairy, eggs, or other ingredients known to be dangerous for individuals with food-related disabilities. *How can the Church break bread without breaking bodies?* The answer to that question lies, at least partially, in the acquisition of ecological wisdom that will empower local churches with a deeper awareness of the plurality of bodies present in a world where climate change is reshaping the human body.

## Conclusion

This paper explored how climate change and modern food production practices have been linked to the growth of food-related disabilities. It noted that the growing need for food accommodations are challenging the modern university in relation to new food-accommodations required on campuses to insure the safe inclusion of students with a variety of dietary needs. Not only have climate changes and modern food production practices complicated food-accommodation needs on university campuses, they have complexified the religious practice of sharing meals. To illustrate this, two experiences were shared. The first was from parents of children with life-threatening food allergies. The second was from a group of students at Lesley University who successfully won the right to be considered individuals with a disability. Retelling these experiences can existentialize important ecological concerns that at times remain unconsidered because of philosophical and political barriers. Perhaps it will be at the table as food is shared with individuals with food-related disabilities that a greater awareness of the consequences of climate change are made palatable.

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