

# REFORMING FOOD AND EATING IN PROTESTANT ENGLAND, c. 1560–c. 1640\*

ELEANOR BARNETT

*Christ's College, University of Cambridge*

**ABSTRACT.** *As the field of food history has come to fruition in the last few decades, cultural historians of early modern England have begun to recognize the significance of food and eating practices in the process of identity construction. Yet its effect on religious identities has yet to be written. This article illuminates a printed discourse in which Protestants laboured to define a new relationship to food and eating in light of the Reformation, from Elizabeth I's reign up until the Civil War. It is based on a wealth of religious tracts written by the clergy, alongside the work of physicians in the form of dietaries and regimens, which together highlight the close relationship between bodily and spiritual concerns. As a result of the theological changes of the Reformation, reformers sought to desacralize Catholic notions of holy food. However, by paying greater attention to the body, this article argues that eating continued to be a religiously significant act, which could both threaten spiritual health and enrich it. This discourse on food and eating helped draw the confessional boundaries and identities of the Reformation period, and so offers a rewarding and novel insight into English Protestantism.*

---

‘To eate meate is but a smal thing, yet a ma[n] eate it with a douting & repining co[n]science he is conde[m]ned because he eateth not of faith.’<sup>1</sup> With these words, recorded in a sermon delivered in the heart of London at Paul’s Cross on 10 June 1571, Edward Bush alluded to the duality of Protestant perceptions

*Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 3BU [erb54@cam.ac.uk](mailto:erb54@cam.ac.uk)*

\* I would like to thank my Ph.D. supervisors, Professor Craig Muldrew and Professor Ulinka Rublack, for their continual encouragement and their comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks are also due to Dr Kate Peters, who jointly supervised my M.Phil. research at the University of Cambridge, from which this article originally stems. My thanks to the anonymous reviewers at the *Historical Journal* for their constructive feedback. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Levy-Plumb Fund at Christ’s College through the award of a doctoral scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> All pre-1800 works were published in London unless otherwise stated. In this period, ‘meat’ referred to ‘food’, rather than to the flesh meat of animals alone. Edward Bush, *A sermon preached at Pauls Crosse on Trinity Sunday, 1571* (1576), sig. G1r. This sermon is sometimes attributed to Edmund Bunny. See Millar MacLure, *Register of sermons preached at Paul's Cross 1534–1642*, revised and augmented by Jackson Campbell Boswell and Peter Pauls (Toronto, ON, 1989), p. 52.

of food and eating in Reformation England. As a base everyday experience, eating was, on the one hand, a banal and secular activity. On the other, it was a crucial religious concern, which was intricately connected to soteriology. Indeed, in the form of the bread and wine of the eucharist, food was at the centre of the most important Christian sacrament, which could connect the consumer to God and to the spiritual realm through consumption. More specifically, Bush referenced the teachings of St Paul, who had liberated Christianity from the dietary laws of the Old Testament, but who had also warned of the spiritual dangers of making food decisions that went counter to one's own beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Bush argued that seemingly 'small matters' in fact 'may do much hurte', and so necessitate religious reform.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in the light of the Reformation, Bush's brief statement belonged to a vast discourse that questioned the role of food and eating within Anglican Protestantism. While its roots lay in the debates of the early sixteenth century, this printed discourse became most pronounced after the reintroduction of Protestantism under Elizabeth I and up until the Civil War, a period in which reformers both recognized a continued threat from Catholicism and debated the parameters of the new national religion. This article is the first to specifically ask how English Protestants understood food and eating in relation to their reformed, and reforming, faith.

Before Joan Thirsk's 2006 publication, most work on English food in this period was concerned with what was eaten, and its nutritional value, rather than with the meanings attributed to diet by the consumers.<sup>4</sup> However, as the field of food history has come to fruition in the last few decades, cultural historians of early modern England have begun to recognize the significance of food and eating practices in the process of identity construction. In *Food and identity in England, 1540–1640*, Paul S. Lloyd followed anthropologists in acknowledging that the symbolism of food, actual consumption practices, and the act of eating together helped define distinct socio-economic groups, especially in light of the intense social polarization of the period. Moreover, Lloyd showed that periods of religiously significant feasting and fasting could provide opportunity for both ostentatious and pious display in gentry households.<sup>5</sup> In the

<sup>2</sup> Romans 14:23: 'And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.' All biblical references are taken from the King James Version (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> Bush, *Sermon preached at Pauls Crosse*, sig. F4v.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Food in early modern England: phrases, fads, fashions 1500–1760* (London, 2007; orig. edn 2006). The most prominent example of the previous approach is J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's food: a history of five centuries of English diet* (London, 1939). There have also been some novel developments in the dietary nutritional literature, particularly Craig Muldrew's work on the nutrition of agricultural labourers. Craig Muldrew, *Food, energy and the creation of industriousness: work and material culture in agrarian England, 1550–1789* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Paul S. Lloyd, *Food and identity in England, 1540–1640: eating to impress* (London, 2015). For influential anthropological approaches to food and identity, see Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a

wider European context, David Gentilcore and Ken Albala have helped reinstate food into the story of the Protestant Reformation. Foundational Protestant movements lambasted the Catholic church's calendar of fasts in which meat consumption was banned, and reconsidered religious abstinence in the light of a renewed emphasis on dietary liberty.<sup>6</sup> Christopher Kissane's book, published in 2018, made the first significant inroad into the topic of food and religious identity in the early modern period, going beyond fasting tracts to demonstrate that religiously significant eating practices and beliefs surrounding food were central to how early modern people defined themselves and others.<sup>7</sup> Primarily through judicial records, Kissane explored the distinct case studies of the early Inquisition in Spain, fast-breaking in Reformation Zürich, and seventeenth-century witch trials in Shetland. His work in part responded to the recent movement in early modern religious history to explore the 'lived religion' of the laity, the everyday experiences that made up religious identities, rather than to focus on top-down narratives of religious change.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these historiographical developments, the relationship between food and religious identities in the English context has been neglected by scholars of the Reformation. This article will in part redress this absence by adopting a discursive approach in which *ideas* about food and eating are considered, rather than food practices themselves. The food historian Rebecca Earle has demonstrated the pervasive nature of early modern discourse in relation to identity formation. In the context of the colonial encounter with Amerindians, ideas about the distinctions between native and Spanish foods were understood to be powerful markers of human difference, which would shape the colonial project.<sup>9</sup> An important feature of the Protestant discourse on food and eating was its opposition to Catholic practices, both of the English past and present, and of

---

meal', *Daedalus*, 101 (1972), pp. 61–81; G. Feeley-Harnik, 'Religion and food: an anthropological perspective', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63 (1995), pp. 565–82; Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, 'The anthropology of food and eating', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002), pp. 99–119.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Albala, *Food in early modern Europe* (Westport, CT, 2003), pp. 193–207; David Gentilcore, *Food and health in early modern Europe: diet, medicine and society, 1450–1800* (London, 2016), pp. 95–105.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Kissane, *Food, religion, and communities in early modern Europe* (London, 2018). See also Jillian Williams, *Food and religious identities in Spain, 1400–1600* (Abingdon, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Kissane was influenced by Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 12–13. In the specific context of English Protestantism, see Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), p. 2. This trend is also apparent in studies of the Catholic Reformation. See Judith Pollmann, 'Being a Catholic in early modern Europe', in Alexandra Bamji, Geert H. Janssen, and Mary Laven, eds., *The Ashgate research companion to the Counter-Reformation* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 165–182, at p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Earle, "'If you eat their food...': diets and bodies in early colonial Spanish America", *American Historical Review*, 115 (2010), pp. 688–713, at p. 690. See also Rebecca Earle, *The body of the conquistador: food, race and the colonial experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700* (Cambridge, 2012).

contemporary Europe. Whether or not these conceptions of Catholic foodways reflected reality, they were central to the development of a distinctly Protestant identity in relation to food.<sup>10</sup>

This discourse developed in two broad types of sources. First, religious texts written by clergymen, including sermons, fasting treatises, and domestic piety guidebooks, often prescribed particular understandings and uses of food to the laity. In accordance with the religious zeal of the Reformation, the number of these religious texts increased dramatically from the mid sixteenth century. The second type were texts concerned primarily with food rather than religion, particularly vernacular dietaries or regimens, in which physicians offered advice to a literate audience on how to live a healthy life. While the two genres were produced for a disparate range of purposes and audiences, they overlapped in significant ways. Clergymen who approached the topic of food made repeated use of the essential tenets of contemporary medical knowledge, which in this period was based on the humoral theory of ancient Greek scholars, especially Hippocrates, Galen, and Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> Briefly put, each food and each body was made up of a different variation of the four humours (blood, phlegm, choler or yellow bile, and melancholy or black bile) and their respective characteristics (combinations of heat, coldness, moisture, or dryness). The healthiest foods were those that were made up of the same humoral qualities as the body (which was broadly hot and moist), since food assimilated into the body in the digestion process, literally replacing spent flesh.

In this period, English regimens, as Tessa Storey and Sandra Cavallo have highlighted, were written by Protestants who had close ties to the church. As a result, to a greater degree than elsewhere in Europe, the authors of regimens related their ideas about food to theological concerns, often referencing biblical passages alongside the authority of ancient physicians.<sup>12</sup> Religious ideas have received little attention in a secondary literature which has primarily used regimens to explore early modern notions of healthy eating and lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> Yet, bringing together these sources makes clear that, to English Protestants, bodily processes including consumption, sensation, and digestion were of

<sup>10</sup> Catholic conceptions of food are discussed in greater detail in my Ph.D. thesis, but are beyond the scope of the present article. Eleanor Barnett, 'Food and religion in the English and Italian Reformations, c. 1560–c. 1640' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> These ideas also influenced Muslim medicine, and the writings of the physicians Rhazes, or al-Rāzī (854–925), and Avicenna, or Ibn Sina (980–1037), are in turn frequently referenced in early modern English dietary tracts as a source of medicinal knowledge. See Earle, *The body of the conquistador*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey compared English regimens to those of Italy. Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, 'Regimens, authors and readers: Italy and England compared', in Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, eds., *Conserving health in early modern culture: bodies and environments in Italy and England* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 23–52, esp. pp. 31–2.

<sup>13</sup> For leading accounts in this field, see Ken Albala, *Eating right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Gentilcore, *Food and health in early modern Europe*; Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, *Healthy living in late Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2013).

great religious consequence.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, this counters a tendency to define Calvinist piety as solely intellectual or as incorporeal. The span of the discourse is marked out by the sources: by the second half of the seventeenth century the publication of dietary literature declined dramatically, around the same time that the Civil War marked out a new period of religious change in England.<sup>15</sup>

This article begins by considering how perceptions of the nature of food were influenced by the theological changes of the Reformation, arguing that reformers rejected Catholic modes of sanctifying foods. This fed into wider reformed attempts to divorce the material world from spiritual concerns. The second and third sections move from food to the continued religious significance of *consuming* food in Reformation England. The second part demonstrates how reformers perceived of eating as a spiritually dangerous activity, and argues that they justified continued religious control over eating in light of contemporary knowledge of bodily processes. The third section argues that eating could equally, for the godly, be a rewarding pious practice. As Reformation England forged a new national Protestant identity, reformers laboured to define a new relationship to everyday food and eating that reflected its broadly Calvinist, but uniquely English, beliefs and values.<sup>16</sup> This discourse helped draw the confessional boundaries and identities of the Reformation period.

## I

The debates that divided English Catholics and Protestants regarding the material nature of the eucharistic bread and wine are well known. From Elizabeth I's reign, the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – that, through consecration, the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ – was plainly rejected. Reformers emphasized that there was no material or substantial change in the elements. Protestant authors also rallied against the use of a multitude of comestible sacramentals in Catholic church worship, which were blessed by a priest to act as instruments of God's grace.<sup>17</sup> According to the Sarum Use,

<sup>14</sup> Recent work on the Reformations has emphasized the importance of the body in religious experience, and has accordingly given physiological theories more attention. See, in particular, Matthew Milner, *The senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham, 2011); Herman Roodenburg, 'The body in the Reformations', in Ulinka Rublack, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the Protestant Reformations* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 643–66; Lyndal Roper, 'Martin Luther's body: the "stout doctor" and his biographers', *American Historical Review*, 115 (2010), pp. 351–84. For similar trends in the Catholic Counter-Reformation literature, see Wietse de Boer, 'The Counter-Reformation of the senses', in Bamji, Janssen, and Laven, *Ashgate research companion to the Counter-Reformation*, pp. 243–60.

<sup>15</sup> Albala, *Eating right in the Renaissance*, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Broadly speaking, this article concurs with Nicholas Tyacke's conception of a Calvinist consensus within the established Church of England until the Laudianism of the reign of Charles I. See Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the rise of English Arminianism, 1590–1640* (Oxford, 1987); Rylie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Grace is essentially divine favour or power which can regenerate or sanctify the material or person. Sacramentals could also be actions, such as crossing oneself. Similarly, the recipient

the variant of the Roman rite most commonly adopted in England in secular churches before the Reformation, the holy bread distributed to the laity on Sunday (distinct from the consecrated eucharist bread) was blessed so that ‘all who partake thereof may receive health both of body and soul’. Similarly, the salt put into the holy water was exorcised, so that ‘thou mayest be salvation of soul and body to all that take thee’.<sup>18</sup> Other ritual blessings included those of meats, cheese, butter, eggs and cakes at Easter, as well as Easter lamb and herbs.<sup>19</sup> In Catholic theology, these sacramental foods were distinguished from the bread and wine of the eucharist by the strength of their sanctity. Whereas the seven Catholic sacraments worked *ex opere operato* (by the work of the act), sacramentals worked *ex opere operantis* (by the work of the worker), so that grace was not guaranteed in the latter as it was in the former.<sup>20</sup> However, Caroline Walker Bynum has observed that this distinction seems in reality to have been blurred in medieval England, since the formulae for blessings suggested that power lay within the food.<sup>21</sup>

This confusion was re-emphasized by Protestant reformers who understood the blessings as attempts to manipulate matter in order to achieve salvation. Thomas Becon, an early evangelical and religious exile in Strasbourg, returned to England when Elizabeth came to the throne and became one of the most active and staunchly anti-Catholic reformers in print. To Becon, the claim that through holy water and holy bread ‘we maye obtayne health both of bodye and soule’, that it could ‘put away sinne’, meant that Christ had died in vain.<sup>22</sup> Later in Elizabeth’s reign, in a sermon preached in 1585, the clergyman Thomas Sparke more vehemently wrote that the use of sacramentals, this time including holy water, oil, salt, cream, and bread, was ‘robbing of his deare son of his glorie which is due vnto him, that whereas in this their doctrine they ioyne other meanes & helps, to deliuer men from their sinnes’, and that these

---

of the blessed substance was not always a person. Holy water was used in the blessing of the altar, for instance, imbuing the latter with holy power. For a detailed discussion of pre-Reformation practices, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian materiality: an essay in late medieval Christianity* (New York, 2011), esp. pp. 125–76.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick E. Warren, trans., *The Sarum missal in English* (2 vols., London, 1913), 1, pp. 13–17.

<sup>19</sup> A. Jefferies Collins, ed., *Manuale ad usum percelebris ecclesie Sarisburiensis: from the edition printed at Rouen in 1543, compared with those of 1506 (London), 1516 (Rouen), 1523 (Antwerp), 1526 (Paris)* (London, 1960), pp. 65, 81. Other blessings took place unofficially within parish churches, dependent upon local tradition. R. W. Scribner, for instance, demonstrated that herbs or candles were given unauthorized blessings under altar cloth in Catholic Germany. R. W. Scribner, ‘Ritual and popular religion in Catholic Germany at the time of the Reformation’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), pp. 47–77, at p. 73. Following the Council of Trent, the Tridentine rite confirmed the use of several comestibles as sacramentals, including lamb and eggs. See Manlio Sodi and Juan Javier Flores Arcas, eds., *Rituale Romanum: editio princeps (1614)* (Vatican City, 2004), pp. 154–60.

<sup>20</sup> Bynum, *Christian materiality*, p. 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Becon, *The reliques of Rome contayning all such matters of religion, as haue in times past bene brought into the church by the Pope and his adherentes* (1563), pp. 160–3.

‘meanes that they devise are so childishe and so vnfit to be mingled with the precious bloude of Christ’.<sup>23</sup> This rebuttal was commonplace throughout the period in theological tracts and sermons; an early seventeenth-century example comes from Robert Abbot, a prominent Nottinghamshire clergyman and later bishop of Salisbury, who claimed that Catholics ‘giue power to these impotent creatures of water, oile, salt, and such other like, to serue for *soules health and for forgiuenesse of sinnes, and for resisting the power of the diuell*’.<sup>24</sup>

To Protestant theologians, this use of foodstuffs was evidence of Catholic error in soteriology. In the most significant theological doctrine of the Reformation, *sola fide* (justification by faith alone), salvation could no longer be sought through material objects or acts but was rather a gift of God’s grace. By the early 1570s, the majority of educated English Protestants accepted the related Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which maintained that the elect were pre-selected to be saved.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, by 1591, the puritan theologian William Perkins was able to declare that the sacraments ‘cannot confirme anything at all’, and cannot ‘confer grace’ by the sacramental action, but are only signs of God’s grace.<sup>26</sup> This was true for the eucharist, although, since it remembered Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, a belief in Christ’s real spiritual presence meant that the act could unlock predestined grace in the believer. Other benedictions for food in worship were no longer acceptable to reformers, and none were offered in any edition of the English *Book of common prayer*, which sought to establish a uniform Church of England liturgy after the Reformation.

The same theological reform impacted on discussions regarding how to fast as a Protestant. Several tracts were published on this topic, which were particularly uniform in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, and it received much attention in sermons and dietaries.<sup>27</sup> The Catholic church had long instituted religiously significant periods of fasting, when meat was prohibited and fish permitted, on Fridays and Saturdays (variably Wednesday) during the week, on the eve of numerous holy days throughout the year, and during Lent. English reformers argued that the consumption of fish or the avoidance of meat could not impact on salvation since this was granted *sola fide*. The Elizabethan writer Edward Jeninges put it bluntly: ‘the eating of fleshe or forbearing to

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Sparke, *A sermon preached at Cheanies the 14. of September, 1585, at the buriall of the right honorable the earle of Bedforde* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1594), p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Abbot, *The second part of the defence of the reformed Catholicke* (1607), p. 1120, emphasis in original. Abbot was responding to the criticism of William Bishop and other Catholics against the work of the late Calvinist proponent William Perkins.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Marshall, *Heretics and believers: a history of the English Reformation* (New Haven, CT, 2017), p. 497.

<sup>26</sup> Milner, *The senses and the English Reformation*, p. 227.

<sup>27</sup> Specific tracts on fasting began with Thomas Becon, *A fruitful treatise of fasting wherin is declared what ye Christen fast is, how we ought to fast, what ye true use of fastyng is* (1551). See also, Anon., *A very godly and learned treatise of the exercise of fastyng* (1580); Henry Holland, *The Christian exercise of fasting* (1596); Nicholas Bownd, *The holy exercise of fasting. Described clarley and plainly out of the word of God* (1604).

eate fleshe, is not anie matter or thing concerning saluation of man'.<sup>28</sup> In Catholicism, by contrast, fasting could be a penance for sins, or a good work, which helped the pious participant to earn grace and salvation. Counter-Reformation authorities reasserted this divide in sermons and treatises on fasting.<sup>29</sup>

The second common argument made against Catholic fasting practices was that the consumption of fish demonstrated that Catholics mistakenly saw fish as holier than other foods. As Bridget Ann Henisch has shown in her work on food and medieval society, fish was in part associated with fasting because of the idea that it had been spared God's curse of the land through the protection of water, which was itself of special sanctity, based on its role in baptism.<sup>30</sup> This Catholic justification was well known and propagated by Protestant authors in print.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, from early Christianity, meat was viewed as the classic humorally 'hot' food, which enflamed the cardinal sin of lust and led to the loss of sexual innocence.<sup>32</sup> This division seemingly went against the words of St Paul, which were repeatedly quoted in Protestant sermons and tracts: 'for euery creature of god is good, & nothing ought to be refused, if it be receiued with thanks geuing'.<sup>33</sup> Another oft-quoted passage, this time attributed to Jesus, came from the Gospel of Mark: 'There is nothing without man, that can defile him, when it enter into him, but the things which proceed out of him, are they which defile the man.'<sup>34</sup>

These dietary arguments went back to the foundation of Christianity. Among the earliest Christ-believing sects, St Paul maintained that no foods were taboo, and abolished the necessity to adhere to the Jewish food strictures.<sup>35</sup> The Catholic church had in fact sporadically persecuted those, like the Manicheans and the Cathars, who seemed to suggest otherwise through excessive abstinence from meat. Yet, based on traditions spearheaded by Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin, English reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries re-emphasized these arguments to claim that the distinction between foods in the fasting

<sup>28</sup> Edward Jeninges, *A briefe discouery of the damages that happen to this realme by disordered and vnlawfull diet* (1590), p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Luigi Lippomano (archbishop of Verona), *Confirmazione et stabilimento di tutti li dogmi catholici* (Venice, 1553), p. 117r. Catholic responses to Protestant criticisms of fasting will be addressed in Barnett, 'Food and religion in the English and Italian Reformations'.

<sup>30</sup> Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and feast: food in medieval society* (University Park, PA, 1976), p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Francis Dillingham, *A quartron of reasons, composed by Doctor Hill, vnquartered, and prooued a quartron of follies* (Cambridge, 1603), p. 49; Holland, *Christian exercise of fasting*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the menu: asceticism, meat and Christian diet* (London, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> William Alley, *Ptochomuseion = the poore mans librarie rapsodiae G.A. Bishop of Exceter vpon the first epistle of saint Peter* (1565), p. 185r; Samuel Gardiner, *The cognizance of a true Christian ... two duties: fasting and giuing of almes* (1598), p. 20; 1 Timothy 4:3–4.

<sup>34</sup> Mark 7:14; Gardiner, *Cognizance of a true Christian*, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> See David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and their food: constructing otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic law* (Berkeley, CA, 2011), p. 89.



practices of the Catholic church was a reprehensible remnant of Judaism, and so a sinister failure to recognize that Christ had liberated humankind from the Old Testament dietary laws.<sup>36</sup> To William Alley, bishop of Exeter from 1560 to 1570, the fasts of the Roman church were ‘wors then the bondage of the Iewes’.<sup>37</sup> Becon, comparably, used the Judaic language of ‘clean’ and ‘abominable’ to implicate the Catholic church in Jewish practices. He lamented the persecution of those who ate meat on Catholic fasts in pre-Reformation England, who were given the name ‘lollards’ and burnt for their sin, ‘as though god abhorred more the eating of flesh then of fishe, or as though fish wer cleane in the sight of god, & flesh vile & abominable’.<sup>38</sup> Bishop Alley concluded that, unlike Catholics, ‘we should not put anye religion or righteousnes, or anye vnholynes in the meates them selues’.<sup>39</sup> This advice was repeated by physicians, such as the Elizabethan Thomas Muffett (or Moffett), when discussing the nutritional value of flesh and fish, or of abstinence.<sup>40</sup> Muffett explicitly declared that he had ‘fully proved that flesh is as lawfull, as pure, and as holy a meat as fish’.<sup>41</sup> Across media, English Protestant authors forced a greater division between the material and spiritual worlds by deriding the holiness apparently granted to food within Catholicism.

Although other Protestant traditions in mainland Europe made use of similar arguments against the calendrical fasts of the Catholic church, the English crown was unusual in continuing to enforce the custom of fasting through the avoidance of meat and the consumption of fish on Friday, Saturday, and during Lent until the Long Parliament of 1642.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in 1563 as part of the ‘Great Navigation Act’, the secretary of state, William Cecil, introduced Wednesday as an additional fish day.<sup>43</sup> However, the wealth of literature on

<sup>36</sup> On Zwingli, see Kissane, *Food, religion, and communities*, pp. 53–75. On Luther and Calvin, see Gentilcore, *Food and health in early modern Europe*, pp. 100–1.

<sup>37</sup> Alley, *Ptochomuseion*, p. 185r.

<sup>38</sup> Becon, *Fruitful treatise of fasting*, sig. D4r. See also Holland, *Christian exercise of fasting*, p. 19. Fast-breaking was commonplace in Lollard heresy trials: see Grumett and Muers, *Theology on the menu*, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> Alley, *Ptochomuseion*, p. 186r.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Muffett, *Healths improvement: or, rules comprizing and discovering the nature, method, and manner of preparing all sorts of food used in this nation, corrected and enlarged by Christopher Bennet* (1655), pp. 52–7; James Hart, *Klinike, or the diet of the diseased* (1633), p. 158–62.

<sup>41</sup> Muffett, *Healths improvement*, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of fasting during the Long Parliament, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The fast sermons of the Long Parliament’, in *Religion, the Reformation and social change, and other essays* (London, 1967), pp. 294–344.

<sup>43</sup> 1562 (5 Eliz. 1, c. 5). The continued enforcement of fish days has been the subject of several recent articles since G. R. Elton’s study, first published in 1986, in which he argued that this policy should be understood in the light of a conflict between the private economic interests of Yorkshire sea-fishermen and the foreign fish trade of the London Fishmongers’ Company. G. R. Elton, ‘Piscatorial politics in the early parliaments of Elizabeth I’, in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart politics and government* (4 vols., Cambridge, 2002), iv, pp. 109–30. See also R. C. L. Sgroi, ‘Piscatorial political revisited: the language of economic debate and the evolution of fishing policy in Elizabethan England’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British*

fasting in Reformation England, some published specifically in response to this paradox, made clear that such abstinence was not a ‘religious fast’, as it had been for Catholics. Rather, it was enforced for the secular benefit of the fish trade and for the navy, which supposedly lacked both ships and the mariners that made up its personnel.<sup>44</sup> In Thomas Cogan’s 1583 dietary, *The hauen of health*, the order was beneficial because it kept the price of flesh meat down.<sup>45</sup> Observation of this so-called ‘political Lent’ was framed in the distinctly Protestant language of godly obedience. Although St Paul had advocated the liberal consumption of different types of food since ‘all things indeed are pure’, by caveat ‘it is evil for that man who eateth with offence’.<sup>46</sup> To Jeninges, that ‘which is eaten contrarie to the Princes lawes’ was an offence.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Bishop Alley maintained that obedience was due to ‘lawes of Princes, made for a common wealth’.<sup>48</sup>

While these arguments related observation to a religious framework, the fasts themselves were seen as secular. ‘A true Christian fast’, by contrast, was summarized by Thomas Becon as the free abstinence ‘from al kind of meates and drynckes’ for a period of time.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the preacher Radford Mavericke wrote near the end of Elizabeth’s reign that the ‘religious fast’ is ‘not from flesh onely (as the papists do) but from all kinde of meates’.<sup>50</sup> Even the Arminian Henry Mason, who, as was increasingly common in Charles I’s reign, encouraged Lenten fasting, upheld this division in his fasting treatise of 1625.<sup>51</sup> Notwithstanding the nuances in Laudian fasting practices, it is here argued that the division that English Protestant authors across the period saw between themselves and Catholic fasting related to the fundamental disposition of food. As we will see, fasting continued to be significant in reformed thought, but authors sought to remove any religious imperative to see holiness within food itself or within the act of fasting.

In the 1562 dietary of William Bullein, a physician whose fervent Protestantism had led him to resign as the rector of Blaxhall parish in Suffolk

---

*Studies*, 35 (2003), pp. 1–24; Peter Iver Kaufman, ‘Fasting in England in the 1560s: “A thinge of nought”?’’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 94 (2003), pp. 176–93; Alec Ryrie, ‘The fall and rise of fasting in the British Reformations’, in Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie, eds., *Worship and the parish church in early modern Britain* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 89–108.

<sup>44</sup> Jeninges, *Briefe discouery*, p. 9. Jeninges was also the author of a very similar second tract, now in the British Library, which is addressed to William Cecil. ‘Edward Jennynys discourse to Lord Burghley, on the utility to the realm by observing days for eating fish only’, 1570, London, British Library, Lansdown MS 101/22.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Cogan, *The hauen of health chiefly gathered for the comfort of students, and consequently of all those that have a care of their health* (1584), p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> Romans 14:20.

<sup>47</sup> Jeninges, *Briefe discouery*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Alley, *Ptochomuseion*, p. 186r.

<sup>49</sup> Becon, *Fruitful treatise of fasting*, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Radford Mavericke, *Saint Peters chaine, consisting of eight golden linckes, most fit to adorne the neckes of the greatest states, nobles, and ladies in this land* (1596), p. 107.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Mason, *Christian humiliation, or, a treatise of fasting* (1625), p. 118.

at the beginning of Mary I's reign, we find a further way by which Protestants could repress pre-Reformation notions of holy food. Bullein explained that he had read 'in an old Monkish written Herball' that the name *Herba Trinitatis* (herb of the Holy Trinity) given to the wild pansy (*Viola tricolor*) related to the three separate colours but uniform 'sweete' flavour.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, nuts had a long association with the Holy Trinity because of the three parts: the shell, the outer marrow, and the inner kernel. In his book of medicines, Bullein argued that the majesty of the Trinity cannot 'be compared or likened, by any alligory, to any base, vayne venerous flower', and that Christians should not 'paynt any Image' of the Trinity.<sup>53</sup> Only Christ had seen God, he continued, so God's image cannot be replicated by mortal men.<sup>54</sup>

Such refutations against idolatry were commonplace in reformed theology. In the Elizabethan book of homilies which were set out to be read within churches, images of God were likewise declared to be the works of the devil, since God's image could not truly be represented in the material world.<sup>55</sup> Idolatrous worship was offered to the 'sign' or substance of the objects rather than the thing 'signified'. As Matthew Milner argues, this was in keeping with the affective principles of traditional religion, and both Catholics and Protestants were concerned with the repression of idolatrous worship.<sup>56</sup> However, the tendency to separate the material and spiritual, shown clearly in the assertion that religious objects were 'dead', made Protestant reformers more sensitive to idolatry. The adoration of the wafer bread, purportedly evident in its elevation during Catholic mass, was a repeated source of condemnation throughout the Reformation. Bullein's text suggests that other foods could also be open to such accusations, based on their assumed ability to represent God in material form. Bullein instead approached the wild pansy in the 'right diffincion', only in the Galenic sense, as hot and dry, useful for sores and for the healing of scabs.<sup>57</sup> Perceptions of the very nature of food were accordingly altered as a result of the central theological changes of the Reformation in England. Food could no longer depict God in its material properties, materially contain or emit holy power, or have an impact on salvation.

## II

In this printed discourse, reformers sought to desacralize food, redefining the parameters between the spiritual and material worlds that they believed had

<sup>52</sup> William Bullein, *Bulleins bukwarke of defence against all sicknesse, soarenesse, and woundes that dooe daily assaulte mankinde* (1562), p. 41r.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Anon., 'An homilie against peril of idolatric, and superfluous decking of churches', in *The second tome of homilies* (1574), p. 86.

<sup>56</sup> Milner, *The senses and the English Reformation*, p. 221.

<sup>57</sup> Bullein, *Bulleins bukwarke of defence*, p. 41r.

been corrupted in Catholic food practices. Yet this did not mean that eating – consuming food – was of no religious consequence in Protestant thought. Instead, divines made clear that the ‘evangelical liberty’ that saw all foods as equal, and none as holy, must not lead to ‘carnal liberty’.<sup>58</sup> Criticisms of the Catholic fast, which supposedly allowed the consumption of vast amounts of fish while refraining from meat, attest to the fact that gluttony continued to be of great concern to Protestants. For instance, in his aforementioned fasting treatise, Thomas Becon sneered that ‘popish and superstitious fasters’ may abstain from a ‘smoky peace of Bacon or hard salted and poudred biefes or such lyke, though they eate the most delicious fishes that can be gotten, and enfarse their beastly bodies with all the swete meates that ca[n] be inuented and sought out’.<sup>59</sup> True religious fasting instead required abstinence from all foods and drinks, not just from meat. Outside the specific context of fasting, preachers encouraging moral behaviour in their flocks also emphasized the need to avoid excessive eating. John Caldwell, parson of Winwick, preached in 1577 in front of the earl of Derby, Ferdinando Stanley, and his entourage, that by making ‘our bellies our God’ – that is, by excessive consumption – our ‘soules perishe’ and ‘starue for honger’.<sup>60</sup> As is suggested in Caldwell’s warning, in Protestant discourse eating could be a precarious activity because it meant focusing on the material at the expense of superior spiritual concerns.

Importantly, the spiritual dangers of excessive or otherwise unhealthy eating were explained in religious tracts, including sermons, fasting treatises, and piety guidebooks, in relation to physiological theories. In fact, many religious authors explicitly referenced dietary tracts. For example, the Church of England clergyman Henry Mason’s 1625 fasting treatise quoted the French physician Jean Fernel at length, in part to emphasize the inadequacy of Catholic fasting, which supposedly included drinking wine. This more quickly nourished the body than did other foods, he argued, so, although it was a liquid, wine consumption was a clear breach of a fast.<sup>61</sup>

By paying attention to contemporary medical literature, the historian Herman Roodenburg has been better able to understand the practice of preaching in the early modern period as an embodied process that sought to physically ‘mold the sensitive soul’ of the listener.<sup>62</sup> To contextualize fears about eating, we must likewise recognize that, throughout the period, the soul was thought to be in part embodied rather than entirely metaphysical.

<sup>58</sup> Alley, *Ptochomuseion*, p. 185r.

<sup>59</sup> Becon, *Fruitful treatise of fasting*, pp. 44–5. See also Gardiner, *Cognizance of a true Christian*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>60</sup> John Caldwell, *A sermon preached before the right honourable Earle of Darbie, and diuers other assembled in his honors chappell at Newparke in Lankashire* (1577), sig. F3r. Similar assertions were based on Philippians 3:19: ‘Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.’

<sup>61</sup> Mason, *Christian humiliation*, p. 163.

<sup>62</sup> Roodenburg, ‘The body in the Reformations’, pp. 647–8.

A prayer, 'for health both of body and minde' in the best-selling *Booke of Christian prayers* of 1578 declared that the soul 'is annexed to the body, it feeleth the affections thereof and is moued by them'.<sup>63</sup> The Elizabethan physician and ardent Protestant Timothy Bright made sure to stress that the soul could not literally be changed by bodily processes such as eating, but that the *functioning* of the soul could be affected. Eating could physically impact on the clarity of the spirit, which was conceptualized as a semi-physical substance that experienced and governed corporal processes based on the commands of the soul. Bright concluded that the spirit was 'maintained, and nourished by the vse of ... corporall nourishment'.<sup>64</sup> More specifically, the spirit was sometimes thought to reside within the blood. It travelled from the liver, to the heart, and then to the brain, where it met with the animal spirit. Food, in turn, affected the nature of blood. As Cogan put it, 'Concerning the substance of meats, some are good, which make good bloud, and some are ill, which engender ill bloud'.<sup>65</sup> By threatening the correct functioning of the spirit, diet could therefore pose a real physical threat to spiritual health.

Caldwell's claim that the soul would 'perishe' and 'starue for honger' through gluttonous consumption can now be understood to go further than mere metaphor. The stomach was thought to be like a kettle with a heat source below, which would literally 'concoct' or cook food.<sup>66</sup> If too much food was consumed, the kettle's lid could not close, causing the escape of harmful fumes from decaying food that would cloud the head and mind. While gluttony was a sin and condemned in the Bible, it was most often approached in Protestant discourse through such knowledge of bodily processes. Philip Stubbes, the somewhat infamous author of *Anatomy of abuses*, a puritan attack on popular recreation, adopted such corporal knowledge to rally against gluttony and drunkenness. To eat many different types of foods was problematic, he argued, since 'one meat is of hard disgestrure, another of light', they were digested at different speeds, and the latter would 'putrifie and stink' in the body. As a result, the stomach would 'belch forth filthy humors' which literally clouded the head and paralysed the 'vitall spirits & intellectuall powers'.<sup>67</sup> Equally, excessive consumption led to a physical fatigue that would make worship more difficult. John Stockwood declared in a sermon that the devil is like 'the cunning Cooke' who 'prepareth sundrie sweete and pleasant dishes to procure appetite, when as the stomacke, (as it were) gorged already, inuenteth many kinde of vaine exercises for the day', which would

<sup>63</sup> Richard Day, *A booke of Christian prayers, collected out of the ancie[n]t writers, and best learned in our tyme* (1578), p. 111v.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy Bright, *Treatise on melancholie containing the causes thereof, & reasons of the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies* (1586), p. 46.

<sup>65</sup> Cogan, *Hauen of health*, p. 24.

<sup>66</sup> Alcala, *Eating right in the Renaissance*, p. 56.

<sup>67</sup> Philip Stubbes, *The anatomy of abuses contayning a discouerie, or brieve summarie of such notable vices and imperfections, as now raigne in many Christian countreyes of the worlde* (1583), sigs. I2v–I3r.

'pul them from hearing of the word'.<sup>68</sup> The official Elizabethan homily on gluttony and drunkenness similarly described the embodied experience of feeling 'sluggish' as a result of excessive consumption, as a kind of weight that prevented the mind from contemplation of spiritual pursuits.<sup>69</sup> These ideas were not new, of course, being founded in ancient medicine, and feasibly also evident from personal experience. Yet, in the light of the Reformation, the physical impacts of eating became of heightened concern.

These physiological notions fed into a continued emphasis on the religious significance of fasting, but also into the prescription of a moderate diet as part of a godly Protestant ideal. The austere puritan John Winthrop, who would later become a leader in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, adopted 'a spare diett, & abstinence from worldly delights', often simply surviving on beer and bread. This was a means to focus on holy duties, since he found himself 'sleepye & unweeldye' after eating.<sup>70</sup> In her work on conceptualizing English and Italian bodies, Tessa Storey has shown that English physicians believed that there had been a fundamental change in dietary practices after the Reformation, despite the fact that moderation in diet had been central in dietary advice since antiquity.<sup>71</sup> Thomas Cogan, indeed, started his 1584 dietary, *The hauen of health*, by arguing that 'a meane and temperate dyet, in the feare of God, is more commendable than all the delicate fare in the world'.<sup>72</sup> James Hart, a puritan physician in Northamptonshire, argued in 1633 that 'gluttonie and intemperance weakeneth the natural vigor and strength of the whole body, together with all the senses, and hindreth the right operation of the soul'. As a result, he explicitly encouraged 'moderation in his meat and drinke'.<sup>73</sup> Writers of religious tracts, too, took up this appeal to moderate diet. To Stubbes, the moderate consumption of foods was deemed good for both the soul and body because it would 're[f]resh the arteries, & reuiue the spirits'.<sup>74</sup> This ideal stood in contrast to images of lavish Catholic consumption, which, as we have seen, was painted as overindulgent in terms of the amount of food consumed and in its claims about the holy potency of such foodstuffs.

### III

So far, the discourse illuminated appears to have distanced food and eating from the practice of the reformed religion in England. This falls in line with

<sup>68</sup> John Stockwood, *A sermon preached at Pauls Crosse on Barthelmew day, being the 24. of August 1578* (1578), pp. 132–3.

<sup>69</sup> Anon., 'An homilie of gluttony and drunkenness', in *The second tome of homilies*, p. 205.

<sup>70</sup> John Winthrop, 'Experiencia', in Robert C. Winthrop, ed., *Life and letters of John Winthrop* (Boston, MA, 1864), p. 108.

<sup>71</sup> Tessa Storey, 'English and Italian health advice: Protestant and Catholic bodies', in Cavallo and Storey, *Conserving health*, pp. 210–34, at p. 220.

<sup>72</sup> Cogan, *Hauen of health*, ¶2v.

<sup>73</sup> Hart, *Klinike*, p. 103.

<sup>74</sup> Stubbes, *Anatomie of abuses*, sig. I4r.

the widely held view, perhaps best articulated by David Gentilcore, that Calvinists across Europe ‘advocated ... an austerity and guilt-ridden attitude towards the pleasures of the flesh’.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it is noteworthy that sermons became more rigorously against gluttonous consumption over the course of the period, in line with the development of more distinct puritan identities in England, and that this discourse was clearly supported by medicinal literature. Puritans like John Winthrop, as we have seen, came close to advocating an entirely ascetic diet. However, Protestant reformers in England also believed that eating could be a spiritually rewarding activity. Most obviously, it was to be celebrated because food was a gift from God that allowed life to continue by replenishing the body. Flesh was thought to waste over time and was literally regenerated by food.<sup>76</sup> In this way, in his *Treatise of faith*, published in 1631, the nonconformist curate John Ball declared, ‘when we sit downe to meate, we come to a liuely sermon of Gods bountie and loue’. This is because the food that the consumer is faced with ‘is not ours, but the Lords, all the prouision are gifts of his mercie in Iesus Christ’.<sup>77</sup> This message was also relayed to the laity in dietary regimens, in which English physicians commonly framed their discussions about the qualities of specific foods and their use to achieve health in gratitude to God.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, the need to give thanks for the gifts of food at least in part explains the continued prescription of table blessings and graces in Protestant England, which were printed in large numbers in the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline eras in individual sheets, prayer books, and devotional guidebooks. The pamphleteer Philip Stubbes, like Ball, defined table-graces as thanksgivings: ‘For we neuer read, that our Sauiour Christ euer eat, or dranke, but he gauē thanks (or as we call it, said grace) both before the receipt therof, and after.’<sup>79</sup> The blessing of food, more explicit in the prayers said over food before a meal, appears to conflict with an aversion to imbuing foods with holy power, discussed above. However, as one so-called ‘blessing’ in Henry Bull’s best-selling book of prayers indicated, ‘this power [to sustain life] is neither in the breade nor foode’, but was rather granted by God.<sup>80</sup> Instead,

<sup>75</sup> Gentilcore, *Food and health in early modern Europe*, p. 101. Similarly, Ken Albala claims that puritanical thought repressed the development of ‘culinary refinement in Calvinist countries’. Albala, *Food in early modern Europe*, p. 202.

<sup>76</sup> For an example of an elaboration of this theory, see Philip Moore, *The hope of health wherin is contained a goodlie regimēte of life* (1564), pp. xvii–xix.

<sup>77</sup> John Ball, *Treatise of faith divided into two parts. The first shewing the nature, the second, the life of faith* (1631), p. 375.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Hart, *Klinike*, p. 83; Moore, *Hope of health*, p. xxv.

<sup>79</sup> Stubbes, *Anatomie of abuses*, sig. I6v.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Bull, *Christian prayers and holie meditation as wel for priuate as publique exercise* (1596), p. 148. See also Ball, *Treatise of faith*, p. 374: ‘but the blessing is not in the creature, it comes from aboue’. We can compare this, for example, with Gregory Martin, an English Catholic priest, who in 1582 argued that blessing food at the table was not simply a thanksgiving, but

the prescription of table blessings was part of a wider movement in which reformers sought to infuse eating with piety.

In his household guidebook of 1616, in a passage beginning ‘And being set downe at a feast’, the puritan divine Richard Bernard went further than this insistence on thanksgiving, by urging the consumer to use each material aspect of the feast to inspire internal piety: ‘Let the *house* in which thou art, put thee in remembrance of Gods Church’, he argued, and ‘the *furnishing of the Table*’ inspire contemplation of ‘the variety with plentie of all things’ given by Christ.<sup>81</sup> Bernard suggested that the material features of certain foods could also arouse internal devotion. Tasting the sauce in a dish, for example, meant meditating on ‘afflictio[n]s mingled with Gods mercies’, since, just as the sauce made food taste better, God’s mercies made afflictions more bearable. Furthermore, drinking milk, which as a food for babies was analogous to essential or pure food, meant reflecting on ‘the principles of religion’.<sup>82</sup> These internal ‘labours’ were the ‘food of the soul’, which, just as material food gave strength to the body, gave strength to the soul. The consumer could thereby ‘feele strength of grace’ and ‘find the knowledge of God’.<sup>83</sup>

This theology of eating everyday food mirrored the theological reform relating to the consumption of the sacramental food of the eucharist, although the latter was, of course, of greater spiritual consequence. It was widely accepted by the 1570s that Christ was not eaten materially, but that the sacramental act of consumption was spiritually beneficial via internal meditation on the act of his sacrifice, which was symbolized in the bread and wine. For example, the puritan divine Henry Holland argued in 1596 that, when a person received the eucharist, they must meditate on salvation: ‘As thou eatest the bread, and drinkest the wine: so labour by the same faith to appropriate and to apply Christ vnto thy soul’.<sup>84</sup> In doing so, as Thomas Becon put it, ‘unbelievable comfort, joy, and mirth’ of both body and soul was said to be achieved.<sup>85</sup>

A similar idea is evident in Henry Buttes’s 1599 dietary, *Dyets dry dinner*. As implied in the name, Buttes prescribed a feast without alcohol, perhaps in part to appeal to the puritan Lady Anne Becon, with whom he claimed kinship, and to whom he dedicated the treatise. He suggested that the properties of the fig – in this case, the taste – could impart a religious and moral message through contemplation. Whenever ‘we fall to Figges’, he wrote, ‘we haue occasio[n] to remember our fal fro[m] God. This plant in it selfe very bitter, yeeldeth passing sweete fruite: transfusing indeed all his sweet iuyce

---

that the food was rather ‘sanctified by the word and by praier’. Gregory Martin, *A discouerie of the manifold corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the heretikes of our daies* (Rheims, 1582), p. 252.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Bernard, *A weekes work, and a worke for every weeke* (1616), p. 74.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>84</sup> Holland, *Christian exercise of fasting*, p. 36.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Becon, ‘A comparison between the Lord’s Supper and the Pope’s mass’, in John Ayre, ed., *Prayers and other pieces of Thomas Becon* (Cambridge, 1864), p. 378.



into his frute, leaueth it selfe exhaust of sweetnesse, and so by consequence bitter.<sup>86</sup> The juxtaposition between the sweetness of the fruit and the bitterness of the fig tree was a reminder to be wary of worldly temptations, a message made more apt since the fig was often thought to have been the fruit in the Garden of Eden which tempted humankind to fall from grace.<sup>87</sup>

The materiality of food was therefore important in that it inspired internal meditation. This links to the Calvinist emphasis on inner experience rather than outward signs of devotion, and extends Calvin's understanding of the carnality of the sacraments as beneficial only in confirming faith through meditation on the Word.<sup>88</sup> Still, Matthew Milner's work on sensation in the English Reformation reminds us that the internal and material worlds were not so easily separated in contemporary thought. English Protestants maintained the same Aristotelian–Galenic conceptions of affective sensation that had marked pre-Reformation physiology, which meant that, when an object was sensed, it was directly presented to the interior soul.<sup>89</sup> This happened through sensible spirit, which took on the likeness of the object and transmitted the *specie* to the sensitive and intellective souls to be processed.<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, it was commonly accepted that the embodied soul was able to experience sensation, based on Aristotelian physiology which recognized the presence of 'inner senses'. As Timothy Bright wrote, 'the soule smelleth with, & discerneth tasts'.<sup>91</sup> In the case of taste, as described in the widely used thirteenth-century source text edited by the Protestant minister Stephan Batman, the soul received the sensation through sinews in the holes of the tongue.<sup>92</sup> As a result, just as with eating more generally, tasting concerned the soul as well as the body. This did not mean that the food itself transferred grace, nor that it influenced the recipient's nature, but it could stimulate internal contemplation, which was spiritually beneficial. William Perkins emphasized the importance of such in worship: 'the signs and visible elements affect the senses outward and inward: the minde directed by the holy Ghost reasoneth on this manner'.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Henry Buttes, *Dyets dry dinner consisting of eight seuerall courses* (1599), sig. B2r.

<sup>87</sup> The language of expulsion also allowed a sexual pun, which was both humorous and re-emphasized the brevity of material pleasures.

<sup>88</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1559 edn, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), pp. 491–6.

<sup>89</sup> Milner, *The senses and the English Reformation*, pp. 2–4, 17, 165.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Bright, *Treatise on melancholie*, p. 41. Numerous religious texts also attest to the existence of the soul's senses. See, for example, William Perkins, *A reformed Catholike: or, a declaration shewing how neere we may come to the present Church of Rome in sundrie points of religion* (Cambridge, 1598), p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Batman, *Batman upon Bartholome, his booke De proprietatibus rerum* (1583), p. 35. This text was widely used in the sixteenth century as an encyclopaedia: see Rivkah Zim, 'Batman [Bateman], Stephan [Stephen] (c. 1542–1584)', *ODNB*.

<sup>93</sup> William Perkins, *A golden chaine: or, the description of theologie* (Cambridge, 1600), p. 1001.

The taste of sweetness, in particular, was often associated with the acquisition of spiritual knowledge or devotion. This was the highest taste in Galenic theory as it was humorally hot and wet; sweet foods were more easily assimilated into and nourished the body, which possessed the same humoral qualities. The use of the term to describe spiritual experiences may therefore have simply been a metaphor that reflected the value of such experiences. It also had a linguistic precedent, since *suavitas* could refer to both sweetness and persuasion.<sup>94</sup> However, as Rosemary D. Hale, Rachel Fulton, and others have suggested in the context of continued references to the eucharistic bread and wine as sweet in medieval Europe, we cannot be sure that descriptions of sweetness did not reflect a real spiritual sensory experience rather than solely a physical sensation.<sup>95</sup> It is clear that, in Protestant discourse, the relationship between sweetness and spiritual (as well as physical) health offered a more positive outlook on consumption. Physicians and theologians alike commonly warned about the excessive consumption of foods, especially sweet foods, which, because of their great nourishment, were most at risk of invoking gluttony and also of inciting ‘hot’ lust and lechery. Yet, despite an association with the sombre rejection of bodily pleasures, John Ball was among the ‘hotter sort’ of Protestants who understood gastronomic pleasure as spiritually beneficial because it brought the consumer to pious contemplation.<sup>96</sup> He said, ‘the more sensible the creatures are, the more pleasant and delightsome to our palate, the more should we be affected with the sense of Gods loue and fauour’.<sup>97</sup> Eating could therefore continue to be a spiritually rewarding exercise for Protestants, but in a way quite distinct from Catholicism.

#### IV

In his satirical play of 1599, *Nash’s Lenten stuff*, Thomas Nash pondered how Catholic fasting regulations had come to be. He imagined a poor fisherman and his wife falling to their knees in reverence when a herring that they had caught turned from white to red when smoked. Receiving permission from the king, they took the fish to the Pope in Italy, who was equally so taken by the strong odour when cooked that he declared this to be a holy sacrifice. The fish was subsequently worshipped with *Ave Marias*, sprinkled with holy water, paraded in a lavish procession, and finally given a Christian burial.

<sup>94</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, p. 89.

<sup>95</sup> Rachel Fulton, ‘“Taste and see that the Lord is sweet” (Ps. 33:9): the flavor of God in the monastic West’, *Journal of Religion*, 86 (2006), pp. 169–204; Rosemary D. Hale, ‘“Taste and see, for God is sweet”: sensory perception and memory in medieval Christian mystic experience’, in Anne Clark Bartlett et al., eds., *Vox mystica: essays on medieval mysticism in honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 3–14.

<sup>96</sup> The term ‘hotter sort’ of Protestant was originally employed to refer to those of a puritan tendency in Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan puritan movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1967), p. 26.

<sup>97</sup> Ball, *Treatise of faith*, p. 375.

Even the embers that the fish had been cooked on were now holy to the Pope, since they had touched the holy body of the fish; Nash humorously suggested that this was why ember days were celebrated.<sup>98</sup> In the story, the extraordinary visual and odorous characteristics of the herring were deemed miraculous by the Catholic figures. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that, in medieval Catholicism, indeed, matter could demonstrate its holiness through such material and sensual signs. When wood or host wafer bled in a common medieval miracle, ‘matter showed itself as transcending, exactly by expressing, its own materiality’.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, Nash’s satire relied on the audience understanding the sight and smell of the fish to be lowly material processes that were distant from spiritual concerns. By the turn of the seventeenth century, therefore, English Protestants had developed an understanding of food and eating that they saw as distinct from that of Catholicism. This article has traced this understanding in a printed discourse, in which reformers sought to define food and eating within Anglican Protestantism, after the Reformation and until the Civil War.

Fundamentally, the division between Catholic and Protestant foodways was based on the Protestant rejection of the idea that material foods could embody spiritual power. This was built upon the reformed doctrine of *sola fide*, which divorced salvation from material acts and substances. A sensitivity towards idolatrous worship, of the sign rather than the signified, also underlined this greater separation between the material and spiritual worlds. Additionally, Protestant authors re-emphasized the teachings of St Paul, that no distinction could be made regarding the holiness or ‘cleanliness’ of foods, since all were equally God-sent and good. Reformers accordingly sought to relocate spiritual power in internal meditation, and a personal relationship to the creator.

This did not mean, however, that the material realm was of no significance in the reformed faith. By paying attention to the body, it has been shown that eating remained an act of deep religious significance throughout the period. Indeed, a secondary aim of this article was to bring together a wealth of religious texts with dietaries and regimens. Distinctively, in England these two genres directly spoke to each other and together emphasized the significance of bodily management to religious concerns. As well as building on biblical examples that stressed the superiority of spiritual over material pursuits, dietary advice uniformly argued that overeating or unhealthy consumption threatened the functioning of the soul, based on contemporary knowledge of the body. Furthermore, the final section has argued that food could not be divorced from religious experience, but was actively incorporated into a vision of reformed Protestant piety, especially among the godly, most vocal from the

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Nash, *Nash’s Lenten stuff: containing the description and first procreation and increase of the town of Great Yarmouth, in Norfolk*, ed. Charles Hindley (London, 1871), pp. 88–91.

<sup>99</sup> Bynum, *Christian materiality*, p. 35.

start of the seventeenth century. This is perhaps not surprising given the necessity of food for sustaining life, and its believed physical interaction with the body and soul. While holy power was no longer present in the food itself, the material properties of food continued to be important as a tool through which to focus the mind on spiritual pursuits, to connect the consumer to God, and to unlock predestined grace. In this way, the Reformation described here through food concurs with Alexandra Walsham's description of the Reformation through landscape: 'it upheld the idea that God used nature as a supplementary text of revelation and that He emblazoned trees, springs, and other natural and preternatural phenomena with moral and spiritual lessons'.<sup>100</sup> Tied to this Calvinist notion of providence, even before the ceremonialist agenda of the later part of Charles I's reign, English Protestants did not divorce piety from the material world. Food was at once profane and a tool through which to connect to the godly. Upon inspection, then, the discourse on food was more complicated than simply a Calvinist tendency towards physical asceticism.

What is more, the lines that Protestants sought to draw between themselves and Catholics were more blurred in reality. Catholics, especially in response to the Reformation, reinforced arguments against idolatrous worship, the division between sacraments and sacramentals, and, specifically in regards to eating, arguments against the Old Testament division of clean and unclean foods. For example, the English Catholic Thomas Harding, responding to Bishop John Jewel's *Apology* from exile in Douai in 1565, argued that friars and monks 'put not great holines', as Jewel had claimed, 'in eating of fish, nor of hearbes', knowing that they should not 'put holines in such owtward thinges'.<sup>101</sup> Yet, as is now clear, these concessions were not sufficient to prevent a discursive rift between the two confessions. To Protestant writers, Catholic food practices were erroneous and heretical: superstitious, Judaic, idolatrous, and gluttonous.

The next part of the story of the Reformation through food is to ask how these discursive changes influenced the reality of lived religion in Protestant England. Paying attention to how food was understood and the physical processes surrounding consumption and sensation has important consequences for this task, in bettering our understanding of what contemporaries believed was happening when they ate, and therefore how they experienced eating. Work on the evidence of consumption practices is also needed to consider the extent to which these ideas were meaningfully taken up by the populace, and at what pace. Interestingly, Ronald Hutton has shown that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Protestant laity made hot cross buns for Good Friday in the

<sup>100</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *The reformation of the landscape: religion, identity and memory in early modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011), p. 566.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Harding, *A confutation of a booke intituled an apologie of the Church of England* (Antwerp, 1565), pp. 145–7, in reference to John Jewel, *An apologie, or aunswer in defence of the Church of England concerninge the state of religion used in the same* (1562), p. 21.

belief that the food was full of supernatural power.<sup>102</sup> Yet, as is clear in the case of fish fasts which reformers both rejected and encouraged using distinct justifications, early modern people were adept at living with compromised and conflicting ideas that did not always have a direct relationship to practice. This article has shown that ideas about food were, regardless of practice, a vital way by which Protestant thinkers understood their faith, and defined it in relation to the Catholicism that they sought to reform. Linked as they are to questions about how the temporal relates to the spiritual, food and eating were essential concerns for Protestant reformers, and this discourse offers a rewarding and novel way by which to explore the divisions of the Reformation period.

<sup>102</sup> Ronald Hutton, 'The English Reformation and the evidence of folklore', *Past & Present*, 148 (1995), pp. 89–116, at pp. 102–4.