

## **Exploring *Food, Culture, and Society* Through a Theology of Creation**

In Fall 2021 I introduced several innovations in *SOC 356: Food, Culture, and Society* that grounded the course in a theology of creation, which enabled insights that would otherwise be unattainable. The previous two times I taught this course faith was integrated by including Scripture references related to food and eating, asking discussion questions related to modern food practices and the faith, and assigning readings related to theological topics, such as gluttony and fasting. These are important methods of integrating faith and learning (which occurred on a daily basis), but in hindsight they are best understood as additions to a sociological perspectives on food and culture, rather than transforming our understanding of food and culture altogether.<sup>1</sup> In the Fall 2021 iteration I significantly altered this course by grounding the whole semester in the theology of creation offered by Norman Wirzba's (Union's Scholar-in-Residence in 2012) book *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Over the course of the semester we read the entirety of this book, which significantly altered the way we understood the social and cultural significance of food, as well as provided additional insights on some of the problems perpetuated by the modern food system.

Specifically, *Food and Faith's* theology of creation emphasizes:

- Food is not merely raw material to be eaten in a utilitarian manner, even if our intentions are good (e.g. to gain muscle, lose weight, etc.). Rather, food itself is a good gift from God, meaning its consumption is spiritual practice that affects our lives beyond the table.
- Eating can even become an act of worship that glorifies God when we gratefully enjoy the goodness of His gifts.

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<sup>1</sup> Glanzer and Alleman, *Idea of Christian Teaching*, 62.

- Membership: As embodied creations we necessarily exist in relationship to air, soil, plants, animals, other human beings, and God. Our very life depends on this membership: plants and animals must die to create the nutrient soil that allows food to grow, and our food must die for us to consume it. We too will die and become "food" (soil) that feeds plants.
- Membership in eating extends to other people (those who provide our food and those we eat with), as well as to God. Eating both requires and demonstrates the importance of membership.

### **How the Theology of Food Transforms the Typical Sociological Approach**

This theological understanding of creation allows for a deeper understanding of the problems with the modern food system. The typical sociology of food class covers topics such as commodification, the social meaning of food, how eating contributes to people's sense of identity, obesity, the incentives of the food industry, and the ecological effects of modern patterns of consumption. This course assigned readings on each of these topics, which took on new meaning when explored from the foundation of Wirzba's theology of creation:

- Commodification: Treating food as a commodity may lower prices, but it adds the spiritual cost encouraging people (even Christians) to envision the created world as mere "stuff" without any deeper meaning, rather than a good gift from God.
- Obesity: Many sociology of food courses explore the social determinants of obesity, including the fact that in recent decades the food system has added 700 calories per person per day into stores. But the fact that nearly 3 out of 4 Americans are now overweight or obese cannot merely be attributed to willpower, genetics, or the food system, but reflects a wider spiritual illness: the inability to receive food as a gift and savor its goodness within limits.

- Ecological effects: It is estimated that the air pollution from the factory farming of meat causes 17,000 deaths per year in the United States. This is one important consideration for any class on the modern food system, but a theology of creation also allows us to see that the root of the problem is an inability to recognize our own membership and dependence on creation.

### **Innovative Assignments Related to the Theology of Creation**

Students generally find this content to be quite compelling, but a primary objective of this course is to help students *experience* the importance of these topics—especially since preparing, sharing, consuming, and shopping for food are daily activities for students. This course is also innovative because it requires two assignments (among others) that lead students to experience the classroom content in an embodied manner. Many students laugh when they hear we are taking a fieldtrip to Kroger, but one possible use of sociology is to "make the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange." Students are primed for our visit by readings that detail how every single aspect of the shopping experience—and every inch of shelving—is designed to maximize spending. Even beyond the store's layout food is branded, packaged, and marketed in ways that are consistent with what food journalist Michael Pollan calls "nutritionism," which describes how our food system has become dominated by "food-like substances" where nutrients are mechanically manipulated to meet consumer preferences (e.g. "Now with reduced fat!" "Contains 100% of daily vitamin C!" "Iron fortified!"). When students begin to recognize this phenomenon at Kroger the familiar experience of shopping suddenly seems strange—as they gain a deeper awareness of the food system shapes their own shopping and eating habits.

The practice of eating together is an essential component of this course as well. Our first class was held in our backyard, where I served students one of my favorite cuisines: Indian curry.

I also announced that students would be required to serve a meal or dish to the class (costs were reimbursed) that has some deeper meaning to them and their family, thereby inviting the rest of the class to share in their family's history or traditions. The purpose of this assignment was to foster a sense of community and membership among students in the course and to reveal the powerful effects of sharing a meal together. This assignment requires a certain level of vulnerability for those preparing the meal, and a sense of gratitude for those receiving it. As a result, we ate together on a weekly basis which strengthened our shared “membership.”

### **Evaluation of Success**

To assess these innovative changes I administered a custom evaluation to determine how this emphasis on the theology of creation fit with the rest of the course content. The results (see appendix) indicate that 90-100% of students (n=16; 80% response rate) “strongly agreed” that this course helped them to appreciate their membership within creation, to see food as a gift, and to recognize how modern patterns of food consumption often undermine a deeper appreciation of creation. Some of the students struggled with *Food and Faith*’s occasional use of theological jargon or inclusion of topics that were less relevant to the course, so in future years I will be more selective about which pages and chapters I assign. Students generally found the assignments to be beneficial, as 81% stated the Kroger trip to be “very helpful,” while 56% experienced the cooking assignment as “very helpful.” Based on the standard course evaluation it seems students would benefit from more specific guidance related to the written reflection on the cooking assignment. Overall, I believe these innovations were successful—illustrating how the integration of faith and learning can truly transform the content and allow for insights that would not otherwise be possible.

## Appendix: Custom Course Evaluation Results

### Q1 - This class helped me...

| # | Field   | Strongly agree |    | Somewhat agree |   | Neither agree nor disagree |   | Somewhat disagree |   | Strongly disagree |   | Total |
|---|---|----------------|----|----------------|---|----------------------------|---|-------------------|---|-------------------|---|-------|
| 1 | Understand food as a gift from God that allows us to better receive his love and grace.   | 93.75%         | 15 | 6.25%          | 1 | 0.00%                      | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |
| 2 | See food as an essential component of our membership/communion in/with God, each other, and creation (plants and animals).                      | 100.00%        | 16 | 0.00%          | 0 | 0.00%                      | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |
| 3 | Better envision how and when our approach to food and eating is glorifying to God   | 62.50%         | 10 | 31.25%         | 5 | 6.25%                      | 1 | 0.00%             | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |
| 4 | See how the modern food system makes it difficult to approach food and eating in a way that is consistent with its deeper meaning as creation   | 100.00%        | 16 | 0.00%          | 0 | 0.00%                      | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |
| 5 | Gain a deeper understanding of the Christian faith more generally   | 68.75%         | 11 | 31.25%         | 5 | 0.00%                      | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |
| 6 | The theological foundations of this course (think Wirzba) enriched its approach to sociological content (i.e. the food system, identity, etc.). | 56.25%         | 9  | 37.50%         | 6 | 0.00%                      | 0 | 6.25%             | 1 | 0.00%             | 0 | 16    |

### Q2 - How helpful were the following assignments and activities for EXPERIENCING (and not just knowing) the main points from the course?

| # | Field                                 | Very helpful |    | Somewhat helpful |   | Not too helpful |   | Not at all helpful |   | Total |
|---|---------------------------------------|--------------|----|------------------|---|-----------------|---|--------------------|---|-------|
| 1 | Trip to Kroger                        | 81.25%       | 13 | 18.75%           | 3 | 0.00%           | 0 | 0.00%              | 0 | 16    |
| 2 | Magazine analysis                     | 50.00%       | 8  | 43.75%           | 7 | 6.25%           | 1 | 0.00%              | 0 | 16    |
| 3 | Sharing meals throughout the semester | 56.25%       | 9  | 37.50%           | 6 | 6.25%           | 1 | 0.00%              | 0 | 16    |