

Peppernuts and Anarsa:

Food, Religion, and Ritual

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I recently learned to eat anarsa—a sweet, rice-based treat—while traveling in India visiting with Mennonite women, and learning about their religious lives and food practices. It was late February, but I was told that Christians in India normally prepare anarsa at Christmastime as a seasonal and festive treat. I couldn't help but reflect on the similarities between this Indian specialty and peppernuts, one of my own culture-based Christmas foods. I concluded that the ingredients, preparation, and taste of the particular foods that I—a Canadian Mennonite woman—and my Indian Mennonite counterparts eat are quite different, as are many aspects of our cultures, but that the purpose and meaning surrounding such foods actually hold much in common.

Anyone who is part of a faith community knows that food is involved at some point in the community's life together, whether it is the community-building that happens at potluck meals, the daily or seasonal religious rituals that are central to faith practice, or the living out of beliefs through food charity. Food-focused religious rituals and practices are central to many of the world's faith traditions: a few examples include Muslims fasting during Ramadan and eating halal; Jews partaking of the Seder meal and eating kosher; Buddhists offering food gifts to fill themselves with the divine presence; Hindus placing restrictions on eating beef; and the Jains' extreme non-violence in their food habits. Because food preparation often takes place within the female realm of household activity, food-related rituals can provide women with a special and sacred space and role within their religious community.

I have sometimes bemoaned the fact that my own faith tradition, in its desire to simplify, or indeed eliminate religious ceremony altogether, did not have any faith-based food rituals. Of course, there was the communion meal—in my experience celebrated just twice a year and excluding unbaptized “members” of the community, particularly children. These little bits of bread and sips of grape juice just didn't really feel like eating and seemed quite unlike the first

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Lord's Supper.

Yet in our human yearning to express our spirituality in everyday practices, and vice versa—to sanctify our daily tasks—we have managed to connect certain moments in the Christian year with the customs and practices of our cultural foodways.² These subtexts in the Christian message have, I think, given women a sense of presiding over the sacred, especially in the past when their ecclesial roles were limited. This reminds me of Easter when my mother bakes Paska—that egg-based sweet bread from Eastern Europe that symbolizes the breaking of the Lenten fast (although we neither fast nor avoid much at all during Lent!).

During the Christmas season, my mother has always made peppernuts, a traditional northern European cookie that is small and spicy, either hard or soft. My grandmother made them too. One of my male colleagues bakes them in mammoth batches, and as a seasonal workplace custom, they are eagerly anticipated by all of us—Anabaptist, neo-Anabaptist, and non-Anabaptist alike. This year I too made them and learned that there are as many different ways to make peppernuts as there are bakers and recipes. These Christmastime peppernuts carry no explicit religious meaning nor is their consumption required of a practicing Mennonite, but they do link me to the cultural and also religious past of my grandparents in Ukraine. Norma Jost Voth's *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia* offers several stories that highlight not only the cultural but also the religious meaning that was implicit in peppernuts.³ When Mennonite refugees, mostly women and children, fled their homes in the Soviet Union in the midst of the Second World War and found temporary safety in Berlin, they were fearful and hungry. However, Mennonite Central Committee workers were able to arrange for ingredients and the use of an oven so that women could prepare more than a thousand little sacks of peppernuts for the gathered refugees on Christmas Eve. It was a sign of hope in the midst of despair, and that God had not abandoned them. Apparently among some Mennonites in Paraguay, peppernuts cut with a thimble were even used during the communion service.

During my brief tour of Mennonite communities in India, in addition to experiencing a wide array of delightful dishes and warm hospitality, I discovered that anarsa, like peppernuts, is made for special festive times of the year, especially Christmas. I first learned about anarsa from a group of women in

² Food studies scholars frequently differentiate “foodstuffs”—the things we eat—from “foodways”—the attendant practices and customs.

³ Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia*, vol. 1 (Inter-course, PA: Good Books, 1990), 364–402.

the Bihar Mennonite Mandli in Jharkhand state. Lily Kachhap described the time-consuming process of making anarsa that begins with several days of soaking raw rice, then drying and grinding the rice finely to powder; then it is mixed with sugar or jaggery (unrefined cane sugar), and optional ingredients like coconut, nuts, or dried fruit. The mixture is formed into flat or round shapes and then fried in oil. I learned quickly that, as with peppernuts, there are many variations according to the style and preferences of the cook. In fact, the debates I witnessed about preparing anarsa were as animated—if not more so—as the discussions about the “authentic” way to make peppernuts at my Mennonite workplace.

One woman declared that every Christian home would have anarsa at Christmas, while another said that when Mennonite women began making it in the weeks of Advent, their non-Christian neighbors began to come around hoping for a taste. (This past Christmas, I brought peppernuts to my Palestinian Muslim neighbors in reciprocity for the many Arab snacks they have brought to my door.) Some sources say that anarsa is a traditional Hindu food associated with the festival of Diwali (festival of lights), which normally occurs in mid to late autumn. It was interesting to ponder the migration of this special treat from Hindu kitchens during Diwali to Mennonite kitchens just a few weeks later at Christmas. These Indian Mennonite women came to associate their anarsa-making with a religious season, just as I did with my peppernuts.

While peppernuts and anarsa are different in their cultural origins, taste, and ingredients, they are very similar in meaning for Mennonite women of different ethnicities. There are other shared food practices that highlight the central role that women have in the life of their congregations. Mennonite women of my ancestry have long prepared food for weddings and funerals in their churches, brought special “horn of plenty” food offerings at Thanksgiving, and held bake sales to raise money for the local or wider church. I found this is also true of Mennonite women in India and a common ritual there called *Mutti Daan* (handful offering), whereby women would set aside a handful of uncooked rice while preparing the family meal; those handfuls would accumulate until the women brought them to church, where their collective offering of rice would be sold to raise funds for activities in the congregation. The regularity of the offering and, as one woman said, the prayerful way in which this was enacted, put women into a sacred space within the spiritual life of the congregation. (More recently, the collection of rice has been replaced by the collection of monetary donations.)

I think that sometimes in our effort to find unity in Christ, we of the Anabaptist-Mennonite global church are uncomfortable talking about the unique

and disparate cultural traditions that are embedded in all of our daily lives and also infusing our worship and religious practices, of which foodways are one example. While there may be huge divergence in the ingredients of prepared dishes, shared meaning “at the table” could well be the place where intercultural dialogue thrives the most. Furthermore, the preparation of special foods at holy times and in service to the church imbues (traditional) women’s work with an implicit sacredness. This was especially true in eras when women were denied access to many officially recognized ecclesial roles.

For faith groups that are tied to particular cultural traditions, whether contemporary or ancestral, food holds extra meaning as a material and spiritual entity that ties us to our religious beliefs and our cultural identity. The preparation of both peppernuts and anarsa carries this purpose and conveys love—for God, for the birth of Jesus, for the labor of his mother, Mary, and for the people that we share these Christmas treats with. It may not have been a coincidence that shortly after I first learned about anarsa, while traveling the jam-packed roads of Jharkhand state in India, I saw a large truck with this slogan in large letters on the back: “Cook Food. Serve Love.” Looked pretty Anabaptist-Mennonite to me.