Ken Albala — ORIAS Summer Institute 2014

"Fasting in World History"
Ken Albala, Professor, History Department, University of the Pacific
Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Albala explained that fasting, as a theme, was something of an anomaly for him, as most of his work deals with eating. His publications encompass works on nutritional theory and fine dining, as well as cookbooks, all based in the Renaissance. But the study of fasting raises interesting questions, foremost among them: Why do people do it? What motivates someone to refuse to perform a biological necessity? Fasting thus draws food into an intriguing nexus with religion, as religious strictures and individual religiosity have been at the base of most fasting behavior, historically; and even now there is a spiritual basis adduced for much fasting.

The Old Testament is full of fasts, frequently undergone as private or collective acts of atonement—a means of appeasing God's wrath. The Pilgrims, too, fasted, though it is for their feasting that they are chiefly remembered. The Judaic Nazarene ascetics functioned as a kind of counterculture, abstaining from meat and wine in a society where both play a role in sacred rites. Tangential to fasting behavior is the complicated cluster of Jewish food laws, among which the proscription of pork looms large. Professor Albala rejects common explanations for this law—that pigs carry trichinosis, that they are in competition with humans—saying (with a nod to the work on Levitical food laws done by Mary Douglas and Jean Soler) that it goes back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, fruitarians both, destroyed neither plants nor animals in pursuit of their bodily nutrition. They had the run of the garden (but for the fruit of two trees), and after their expulsion were shepherds (still vegan). Both the consumption of meat and wine and the rite of sacrifice began with Noah, who performed a sacrifice upon reaching land (somewhat ironically, given the pains taken to protect his beastly charges up to that point). Sacrifice thereafter becomes codified in the Book of Leviticus, the principle being that murder (including killing to eat) is a sin warranting punishment, but that punishment can be transferred to a lesser animal, like a lamb, or a (scape)goat. Somehow mixed into all of this is the little-known fact that pigs are omnivorous, and Yahweh condoned the eating only of animals which don't kill to eat. Perceived taxonomic aberrations, such as animals who "move wrong," are also cause for proscription: animals can be eaten only if they use legs on land or fins in water. Neither snakes nor prawns are kosher.

Blind adherence to Biblical law began to be disparaged by reform movements, who felt the focus should be on being good, not on keeping kosher. Among those espousing this precept were Hillel (who, challenged to recount the entire contents of the five-volume Torah while standing on one leg, said simply "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you"), and Jesus, who thought that God cares what comes out of your mouth, not what goes into it. These were touchy times for messiahs—the triumphant revolt of the Maccabees against the Seleucids was still fresh enough in memory to make the Jews wary of awaking Roman oppression—and Jesus was lucky to have an apostle of Paul's

caliber. Jesus never heard the word "Christos," or dreamed of creating a religion, but Paul managed such details brilliantly and, into the bargain, dispensed with such potentially unpopular complications as circumcision and dietary proscriptions.

The first two centuries of Christianity teemed with people seeking holiness and God's favor by imposing hardships on themselves. A popular means of such mortification lay in refusing to succumb to bodily demands—for sleep, for sex, or for food, the latter privation often enhanced by the discomfort of a desert sojourn. Attempting to learn why anyone would want to do such things to themselves, Professor Albala researched Western medical and dietary science of the period, which was dominated by the Hippocratic theory of humors as promulgated by the philosopher physician Galen. Among many fascinating aspects of humoral theory, it was considered healthy to consume things akin to the human organism (including pork and, due to its Eucharistic conversion to blood, wine); the "blood" and flesh thus incorporated into the body would be stored as sperm, rendering it dangerous (or at least nonnutritious) for women to abstain from having sex with men. (An intriguing sidelight is Galen's comparison of male and female anatomy: a well-nourished newborn will have a "perfect" penis—an "outie"— and thus be a male, whereas an ill-nourished child will have an "imperfect" ["innie"] penis and therefore be female.) In any case, someone wishing to be celibate would do well to avoid such choleric, lust-inducing items as meat and wine, subsisting instead on cold, dry (melancholic) vegetables or phlegmatic fish, or nothing at all.

Perhaps fearing an unwanted explosion of extracurricular zealotry, the Church sought to manage this spate of self-starvation by instituting a number of required fasts of its own, only to have people complain that the largest of these—the forty-day fast of Lent—came at a time of year when, because it was a phlegmatic season, the consumption of phlegmatic foods (such as fish) would result in sickness. Many Christians managed to avoid the strictures of Lent through the mechanism of the indulgence—a special allowance to enjoy one's red meat and rich food throughout the fast, purchased for a small fee. (The archdiocese of Rouen, whose constituents found life without butter insufferably harsh, used its profits from the selling of indulgences to erect the aptly named Butter Tower.) The selling of indulgences, along with the selling of Church offices and a host of other types of clerical corruption, came to be viewed with widespread disgust—grist for the mill of the ensuing Reformation, spearheaded by Martin Luther, who was a firm adherent to Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith alone (not by works, and especially not by abstaining from butter). Ulrich Zwingli, working for the same cause in Switzerland, decried the Church's hypocrisy and money-lust; pointed out that in the New Testament there are no fasts at all; declared fasting rules man-made, groundless, and non-binding (the first theologian ever to express himself thus—and a hint of modern-day fundamentalism can be seen in it); and essentially led an armed revolution against the Bishop of Zurich, dying with a Bible in one hand and a battle axe in the other.

Christianity evolved in a variety of ways in the wake of these protests, with some sects—in defiance of Catholic law—allowing individual, elective fasts but feeling the need for mandated general fasts as well, to address such crises as war, famine, and pestilence. There was a trend toward austerity among such sects as the Calvinists, seemingly

harkening back to the Old Testament, with white wooden churches standing in stark opposition to the gaudy opulence of the baroque cathedral. But fasting itself, as an aspect of religious orthodoxy, once it became unofficial and unenforced, quickly faded away.

Q&A:

Participant: When people in the Medieval and Renaissance times fasted was there use of aromatics instead of eating? Also, according to Galen [given his views about it being nourishing to eat like things], why don't people eat people?
Albala: Galen did say people would be the most nourishing, but cannibalism is forbidden. There are aromatics—the "grains of paradise," cubebs—but they are not nourishing.

Participant: Galen has hot and cold similar to the Chinese system, but their dietary restrictions are exclusively medicinal.
Albala: You find such systems all over the world. There are arguments about mutual influence; it's possible between the Ayurvedic and Greek [systems]. Humoral theory was spread by Mongols; there's a book about East Asian humoral systems; but the classifications are *really* different: rice would be hot and dry, or whatever. The values are different, but classifications exist.

Participant: Is there anything that supports a correlation between fasting in Lent to there being less food available at the end of Winter? Also, what about [the wisdom of] conceiving children during that time period?
Albala: Yes, Spring is the worst time in terms of harvest. Why people didn't cure meat I don't know. People say eat little bites through the day [to conserve food], but hunting and gathering is the total opposite. Our systems adapt—we [nowadays] store up food for several days.

Participant: In the Medieval period Hildegard von Bingen wrote a lot about humors—does she contribute anything on fasting?
Albala: Hildegard was an herbalist, mystic, great writer. There was a lot written about her. Caroline Bynum [in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*] wrote about the spiritual meaning of food for women.

Participant: As to the reasons for fasting, literature talks about mental states—chemically altering the mental state in order to have visions.
Albala: I don't think they made the connection. It's autointoxicating, [involving] endorphins—like when you run and your foot hurts, then it doesn't, because of internal opiums. They didn't knew why it happened, about the influx of chemicals. A lot of people think ecstatic visions occurred because of drugs, ergot, poisons of the past: people were always tripping.

Participant: Will you be including Ramadan in the second book [Professor Albala had alluded to wanting to write two versions—one popular, one academic—of the book about fasting]? Fasting comes up with my Muslim students a lot, though it's not an issue for Catholics anymore.

Albala: It will definitely be in the second book. I don't know much about it yet, though.

Participant: Any background on indigenous people's fasting traditions—non-European?
Albala: There were vision quests, to find your purpose—a lot of hunter-gatherers did it, intentionally trying to have a sacred ecstatic experience. It occurs in ancient Greece too, with the Eleusinian ecstasies—"ecstasy" meaning a "*leading out* of the *stasis*," out of the body.

Primary Sources: Professor Albala shared a 15th-century set of directions for conducting the perfect Easter-day celebration of the return to meat. In it, a description of the proper disposition of trenchers and spoons (forks not yet having replaced fingers), and a number of blatant statements of social inequality, precede a lavish menu. The session concluded with a gluttonous reading of the manuscript.