1 Searching for a Balanced (Practical Theological) Diet

Feeding more than one person at a time has become a complicated enterprise in many contexts. When it comes to food, people have diverse preferences and tolerances, which renders cooking and serving a meal for more than one person fairly demanding. If, in addition, people come from different cultural and religious backgrounds, this adds further challenge, as etiquette or taboo should be taken into consideration. One might picture a modern version of the miracle of the loaves and fishes where Jesus multiplied the food and fed the crowd (Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–24; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14), to be met with responses such as: ‘no thank you, not for me, I am wheat intolerant with an iodine deficiency’, not to mention the gourmands for whom the fish is not fresh enough and who would ask the disciples for extra virgin olive oil to dip the bread in and a pinch of dill for the fish. Of course, there are also the ethically-conscious who would be taking out their cards (Basson 2011, 5–6) to see whether the fish is on the endangered species list before deciding whether or not to eat it.

In spite of this challenge today, hosts – which include religious communities – still try their best to satisfy the needs and preferences of their guests, and to cook and lay a table where all (or at least many) can be simultaneously accommodated. And not only accommodated, but also nourished with a healthy, balanced meal. They do this because they realise the potential of the meal to not only feed people and serve their bodily needs, but also to reconcile, to raise ecological awareness, and touch them in ways that a sermon or a prayer alone cannot (Wepener 2010). In this regard, the warning of Catherine Bell in respect to eating habits and table etiquette is significant: “they are eminently open to manipulation, appropriation, and nuance; in matters of etiquette and ritual, people do not just follow rules” (Bell 1997, 144). The practice of sharing food can deeply impact people’s health, relationships, understandings of ecclesiology, as well as ecology. Eating, therefore, including ritualised eating such as taking the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the Christian tradition, is a practice that should be open for criticism (Grimes 1990, 18).¹

At the Stellenbosch University² in South Africa where I teach Practical Theology, one of my challenges is to develop and teach modules in Practical Theology that accommodate students from a very wide range of backgrounds. This teaching challenge

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¹ According to Grimes (1990, 18): “Ritual criticism is the interpretation of a rite or ritual system with a view to implicating its practice.”

² Previously I taught at the University of Pretoria where my task was similar.
is akin to the challenge of cooking for a diverse group of people, not to just keep them satisfied by catering to all their preferences, but to accommodate them and to ensure that all receive a balanced and nutritious practical theological diet that will sustain them within the contexts they will be working. One of the modules focusing on Liturgy and Homiletics that I developed and that I teach, takes cooking, eating and the table as a central theme and uses it as a *leitmotiv* throughout the module. It is a theme with which a great diversity of students can be accommodated in one curriculum space. The challenge is to open up a transcultural space by means of a hermeneutics of culture, in which eating habits are seen as part of lived religion, and thus of culture (Gräb 2017; Weyel 2014). The module is empirically grounded in the realities regarding commensality, from which the students and lecturer come, and includes eating practices from churches and wider society. It builds on these practices and fosters an appreciation and critical understanding beyond one’s own religious-cultural borders.

In this chapter, I will discuss this particular module which is specifically aimed at laying the table for a transcultural approach towards Practical Theology with the potential to also become trans-religious in future given the developments regarding Faculties of Theology in South Africa. The module and its development should however be placed in a very specific transitional and (post)colonial socio-political context, namely South Africa 28 years after the advent of democracy. In the next section I will unpack this context, a context to which I as lecturer belong, and also my relation to the theme of the module, which is a relation on both an academic and personal level. Thereafter I will briefly outline our students in relation to the context and theme of eating, focusing on their liturgical backgrounds as pertaining to food and eating, followed by a description and discussion of the module.

The description of the module, which is closely connected to my own story, will shed light on the theme of this chapter, ‘Holy Supper / Meal / Sharing Food’ from a transcultural perspective, showing that, when it comes to food and eating, students vary whilst also sharing habits and tendencies (Tisdale 2008, 75–89). Eating as a part of lived religion is experienced by all students, in their own idiosyncratic ways, as well as in shared ways.

## 2 Eating and the Table in (Post) Apartheid South Africa

The table and commensality, or the absence thereof, has a particular history in South Africa. One can begin to tell this story from many different places, but one possible beginning for the theme of the celebration of the holy meal in South Africa, is the meeting...
of the Dutch Reformed Synod in the year 1829. This synod also first raised the so-called ‘colour problem’, and the question of whether people of colour – who were accepted as members of the Churches through confession and baptism – would receive the Lord’s Supper together with born Christians (Kriel 1961, 55). In other words, at this meeting, Christians were discussing whether black and white Christians should eat and drink together in the same building and at the same table when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper or whether they should do so at separate tables in separate buildings. A decision was not taken in 1829. Instead, the landmark and tragic decision on the matter was taken twenty-eight years later. During the meeting of the synod in 1857, the topic of a separate service again found itself on the agenda, with many votes both in favour and against such a decision. A proposal was accepted with a large majority. An extract from this proposal reads as follows:

The Synod deems it desirable and scriptural that our members from the Heathen, be admitted and inducted to our existing congregations, especially where this can be done; but where this regulation, because of the weakness of some, the promotion of the matter of Christ among the Heathen established, or yet to be established, will enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or establishment. (Gereformeerde Kerk 1857, 60; Loff 1983; Vosloo 2017; Wepener 2002)

Thus, in the nineteenth century in South Africa, the holy meal of the Christian faith, the Lord’s Supper, served as one of the main stimuli for the founding of separate churches on account of racial differences. The phrase “the weakness of some” (Gereformeerde Kerk 1857, 60) is a reference to the weakness of those who did not see their way open to partake of the sacrament together. Here, a decision regarding a liturgical ritual (sacrament) deeply influenced ecclesiology and this filtered through into larger society, just like the societal context itself had influenced these decisions. The origin and development of the policy of apartheid can of course be traced back to many provocations, however, for this chapter it is important to note that one important factor was the decision of 1857 on the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Thus the (un)holy meal and (not) sharing of food has a close relationship with apartheid. Over the course of time, the separate celebration led to the establishment of separate churches along racial lines.

Just as (the absence of) eating together played a role in what later became known as apartheid, the table and commensality has also been an important practice during the era of the transition to democracy before and after 1994, the year in which the country had its first democratic election and Nelson Mandela became President. Studies have been carried out on the role of eating and the table in the struggle for justice (De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1983; Wallis and Hollyday 1989; Wepener 2011) as well as in building up the country by means of generating certain kinds of social capital and also promoting social cohesion (Wepener 2019). However, this prevailing ambivalence regarding eating together and also not eating together within the South African context, past and present, forms part of the context in which and for which the particular module discussed in this chapter was developed. Another critical aspect of this context is the wide cultural and Christian denominational di-
versity at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria and the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University.

With this historical and contextual background in mind, I now move to discuss the students who study Theology and who attend the abovementioned module. I will also discuss their lecturer. I will focus on the religious and cultural contexts pertaining to food and eating from which the students and lecturer hail. I will begin with a description of myself as a white middle-aged male lecturer who is also an ordained minister in the Reformed tradition.

3 The Cultural and Religious Background of the Lecturer and the Students

I am a white male, born in 1972 in South Africa. The National Party with their apartheid policy was at that time the ruling party, with John Vorster as prime minister. Our family were members of the Dutch Reformed Church, a denomination that supported the policies of the ruling political party and that celebrated the Lord’s Supper at least four times a year. We were, economically speaking, a fairly typical middle-class family. When I ate, in church and elsewhere, I ate with white people from a roughly similar socio-economic background. This was supported by many apartheid laws. After school, I studied at Stellenbosch University completing my studies in 1998 and was thus a student when our country underwent radical political change. In Stellenbosch however, not much changed in the first years after 1994 as it did in some other parts of the country. We were white Afrikaans-speaking students, with white male Dutch Reformed lecturers in the theological Faculty. The greatest culinary borders we ever crossed as students, were when taking another white person on a date to a restaurant (something most of us could afford). Of course, there were some exceptions to the rule. However, in light of South African racial demographics, and in light of the prevalence of the monocultural tables at which we dined, these exceptions were so rare that they are hardly worth mentioning.

I taught at the University of Pretoria between 2010 and 2019 and since 2019 at Stellenbosch University, and my experience on a Sunday differs vastly from my experience during the rest of the week. Most Dutch Reformed congregations still only have white members. Worship on a Sunday in these churches, which includes communion services, is still “the most segregated hour” (Luther King Jr. 1960)⁴ of the week, whilst borders are crossed in other spaces during the rest of the week. My church reality is still a kind of apartheid experience which is strongly juxtaposed to my experiences during the rest of the week. As one of my children at the age of five aptly remarked during a worship service: “Why are there only white faces in this place?” He asked this question, because,

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⁴ Following a statement by Martin Luther King Jr., “The most Segregated Hour in America,”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L_d8 (30.11.2021).
just like my students, his Monday to Saturday experience of Pretoria – at school, at home, at leisure – was that of cultural diversity.

The students who register for the Practical Theology modules in Pretoria and Stellenbosch were almost all born after 1994; they truly represent the South African demographics with regard to ethnicity and come from a wide variety of ecclesial traditions, including African independent, (neo)Pentecostal, Charismatic, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, to name some. Their experiences regarding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper / Communion / Mass in their churches of course vary. Readers may be familiar with the weekly celebration in churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches, from which several students come, and the liturgies are comparable to the way they are celebrated in Europe and North America for example. There are also several students from churches belonging to the Reformed family. In these churches, the Lord’s Supper is celebrated only four times a year.\(^5\) In some African independent churches, to which a number of the students belong, Communion is celebrated only once a year, and in many Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, when Communion is included in worship, it is seen as an addendum to the main worship service, served after the benediction has been pronounced, and it is not compulsory, with few people attending (Denny and Wepener 2013).

Painting a picture of commensality in such broad strokes in the churches that students are affiliated to is not too difficult, and as lecturer I have tried to attend church services in most, if not all, of the churches our students come from. Painting a picture of their eating habits at home or in public, is however much more difficult. One of the aims of the module is to let students themselves bring descriptions of their eating habits, in church and beyond, into the module to open up a transcultural space.

This very brief description of the eating habits of the students and their lecturer may look fairly insignificant, but when it comes to the theme of food and eating habits, it is quite significant. To quote the South African philosopher Martin Versfeld (Versfeld 1983, 38) from his book Food for Thought. A Philosopher’s Cookbook: “Nothing is more indicative of who we are than our food and table customs”. We are what and how we eat, when eating alone or together. This was true in 1998 in Stellenbosch; it is still true in 2022 in Pretoria and Stellenbosch and this basic truth is critical for understanding why the above-mentioned module in Practical Theology was developed for a post-apartheid and post-colonial South African context (Venter and Tolmie 2013). South Africans can learn to lay their tables as spaces for justice and reconciliation, but this is a conscious choice that must be made, and in which Practical Theology and fields such as Liturgical Studies, can play a significant role. In the

\(^5\) Over the past decades the Liturgical Movement also reached (parts of) South Africa and there has been a call for a more frequent celebration. However, there has been very little success in this regard and the tendency seems instead to move in the direction of even fewer celebrations.
next section several pedagogical practices and curriculum themes from the module are selected and discussed.

4 Making Room at the Table, Making Room in the Module

Broadly speaking, the module consists of two main phases. Firstly, a liturgical phase, focusing on worship and ritual, and more specifically on food, eating and the table. The second half of the module focusses on homiletics and speech and the same focus is kept. Throughout the course of the semester, students read a variety of prescribed texts, whilst, importantly, being exposed to practices in the course of the module.

After the first lecture during which the outlines of the module are sketched and basic theoretical concepts are explained, the class visits Echo Youth Development⁶. Echo has a long-established practice of eating as a community on a Monday evening with all who would like to join them in the larger community. They make a fire, volunteers bring food, and everyone is welcome. Around the fire with a hotdog, bunny chow or a bowl of curry in your hand, you meet people and cross many boundaries: age, nationality, level of education, income etc. For many students, this is their first experience of this kind, and the experience informs and inspires the rest of the module and almost all discussions.

Throughout the course of the semester, students must also keep a food journal and describe when, where, with whom, and what, they eat. During the course of the module students get the opportunity to present the content of their journals to the rest of the class. For the students, this is a learning opportunity to reflect on the impact of their eating habits, on for example the ecology and economy, but also to gain exposure to the practices of others (Bass 2012, 51–60). Passionate debates often ensue: some feel that discussions regarding the sourcing of ethical food and supporting fair trade is an elite hobby of the rich who can afford it, and that the focus should rather be on hunger and inequality; whilst others disagree and deem it an important theme, as everyone’s eating habits impact the poor and the earth. The theme of an ethics of eating is thus dealt with and importantly, food and eating are linked to the issue of poverty in South Africa, as well as to the potential of commensality for social development and the generation of social capital (Wepener and Cilliers 2010, 417–430). What also surfaces are issues pertaining to privilege, which is closely connected to South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past and some students then, for the first time, realise that they are actually white (Beaudoin and Turpin 2014, 251–270). Other students have similar experiences as they discover who they are in conversation with students from different backgrounds.

In addition to the weekly lecture and reading material, we also take a tour of our university campus during lunch time, looking specifically at how the students eat on campus. We do this in a very informal way by just observing what is happening on campus. However, as soon as you take food and commensality as a lens, a whole new picture comes into view. There are very specific cultural borders separating those who eat in relatively expensive cafés and restaurants, those who get cheaper food at fast-food outlets, those who bring their own food to campus and those who visit a food scheme for students. This experience is ideal for introducing the history of the table and commensality in the Christian tradition with a specific emphasis on the Lord’s Supper.

The unfortunate history regarding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in South Africa is introduced, as well as a broader overview regarding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in two thousand years of liturgical history. Here students learn about similarities and differences regarding the development of theology and practice in their own denominational tradition and that of other traditions. The various names for the sacrament of the table such as Mass, Eucharist, Communion, Lord’s Supper etc. are introduced in order to deepen this discussion (Caspers, Lukken, and Rouwhorst 1995).

Throughout the module, anthropological material, especially from the domain of Ritual Studies, is read in combination with theological material (Grimes 2010, 77–88). Ronald Grimes for example shows how practices in the Christian tradition are often orientated on consuming and communicating, which include for example Mass (consuming) in the Roman Catholic tradition and preaching (communicating) in the Protestant tradition. This is probably true for the North American context in which he operates but is true only for some of the students. It does not pertain to those students coming from African Independent churches and (neo-)Pentecostal churches (Wepener 2014, 82–95). Important anthropological reading material is that of Mary Douglas regarding meals and dirt.

Douglas defines dirt as being matter out of place and shows that such a definition implies “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” (Douglas 1966, 44). She also writes that “where there is dirt there is system” (Douglas 1966, 44). Douglas explains that the ways in which humans and societies behave towards dirt or ‘matter out of place’ is the fact that the dirt is “likely to confuse or contradict our cherished classifications” (Douglas 1966, 45). She also explains how those things in society that do not fit our ordered systems and classifications are potential “powers and dangers” (Douglas 1966, 62) threatening our sense of order. And in this regard, she remarks that “Ritual recognises the potency of disorder” (Douglas 1966, 117). Students are challenged to recognise how (holy) meals were used in this regard during the time of apartheid, how this still happens in our churches and society, and how rituals of purity and taboo relating to dirt are important in upholding a certain social structure (Douglas 1971, 61–81).

A last aspect of the module that can be mentioned here, is the part towards the end when students get the opportunity to develop and preach a sermon. The module under
discussion in this chapter builds on previous modules in Practical Theology and the
students are familiar with homiletical theories and approaches of scholars such as Zim-
babwean Eben Nhiwatiwa, South Africans such as Johan Cilliers and Hendrik Pieterse
and American Thomas Long. This is thus an existing repertoire of homiletical works to
which chapters are added and some are revisited (Cilliers 2004; Nhiwatiwa 2012; Long
2005; Pieterse 2001). For this assignment they must choose a pericope from Luke or
Acts pertaining to commensality and also make explicit the context in which they
will preach the sermon, particularly with regard to socio-economic realities (Corley
2018, 137–148). The module ends with the preaching of these sermons, followed by
the lecturer, a guest and the students critiquing each sermon.

Whilst listening to the sermons it becomes clear that students learn a lot regarding
the meaning of meals in their own culture and tradition, but also in that of fellow stu-
dents with different backgrounds. They realise that they still mostly eat with people of
the same background. And that those times in which they do come together and cross
borders, are also mostly around food. They learn that in South Africa, one can assume
one knows who one is, but that one does not fully know until forced to critically look
inside one’s own lunch box. And that the same applies to understanding more about
other people through looking at their lunch boxes. They learn that colonialism and
apartheid are technically gone, but that they do actually still remain. White students,
and a small portion of students from the new black elite, drink sparkling mineral
water, skinny cappuccinos and eat Greek salads, whilst a number of their classmates
get lunch from a food scheme on campus. The picture is bleak, but it is a lot better
than it was 28 years ago. They also learn that they eat together with people from
other backgrounds far more than I and my generation did, not to mention the genera-
tions before us. This is very positive and happens from Monday to Saturday. However,
worship services on a Sunday in South Africa still remain to a large extent the most seg-
regated (racially and socio-economically) hour of the week in many traditions. Students
argue in their sermons for the importance of sharing food for the future of our coun-
try, not only at the sacrament of the Lord’s table, but also the “casual sacramentality”
of the cup of tea, the sacrament of the pie and a coke, the sacrament of the pap and
the braai (Klomp and Barnard 2018, 15–31).

5 Still Searching for a Balanced (Practical
Theological) Diet

The theme of the module discussed in this chapter is the same as the title of this
chapter: Holy Supper / Meal / Sharing Food. And the aim when I developed the mod-
ule was not only to impart knowledge regarding this theme to students, but to create
the possibility of a transcultural practical theological encounter where there is space
for a variety of students (and the lecturer) where a transcultural hermeneutic can be
developed with regard to this theme. In this way I believe a balanced practical theological diet should be developed, a diet or menu that fits the context of a post-apartheid and post-colonial South African context where the legacy of our past is still clearly visible.

The title of the chapter ‘Holy Supper / Meal / Sharing Food’ portrays an ideal. A chapter on this theme from a South African perspective can to a large extent also be titled ‘Unholy Supper / Fast / Not Sharing Food’ or in more positive terms ‘Striving towards the Holy Supper / Meal / Sharing Food’. Basic to a transcultural and trans-religious approach to Practical Theology is the understanding that all people are like all other people, like no other people and like some other people. All people eat and cook their food and it is therefore a practice that reflects this truth. People all also have their very unique ways in which they prepare their food and eat it. And of course, there are groups of people who cook and eat in similar ways. This is also true regarding the students sitting at the table of the Practical Theology module. The menu of the curriculum is not always what can be termed high cuisine, but the hope is that there will at least be a bite or two for everyone, that no student will leave hungry and that it will assist in giving students (and the lecturer) a balanced practical theological diet.

Bibliography


