

The Scoffer and the Believer: Toward a Christian Philosophy of Food Selection

by Theodore Plantinga

All of life?

If you have spent time in a Reformed Christian college, you have probably heard all about our "Reformed world-and-life view." We are told that it serves to distinguish us from many other Christians who may love the Lord as much as we do but remain bogged down in "dualism." Those other Christians do not properly "integrate" faith and learning (although we sometimes say that even this phrase is wrong). The problem is even broader, we are told: those other Christians do not apply their Biblically-derived convictions and insights to "all areas of life," as Reformed people do. Indeed, this is what distinguishes Reformed or reformational people, or perhaps neo-Calvinists, from other Christians: every aspect and dimension of life -- not just the theoretical disciplines but also practical life -- is approached on the basis of a deeply-felt sensitivity to a unified set of creation ordinances, which are not to be confused with Bible texts.

It sounds glorious, and I wish I could believe it. But our record is not quite so rosy, when you take a careful look. Consider this business of food -- which foods to eat, which ones to avoid, and so forth.

Young people in Reformed circles tend not to pay much attention to warnings about the harmful effects of this or that food. Most of them take good health for granted. But the generation ahead of them is quite concerned. At Redeemer College I often hear discussions of food issues, but they usually involve those members of the college community who have a touch of gray in their hair.

When I hear and participate in such discussions (I also sport some gray), I pay careful attention to sources. People are quick to recommend books as containing interesting insights and tips. I do it myself; I even keep some in my office in hopes of finding someone willing to listen to my pep talks about the importance of fiber in one's diet, the dangers of red meat, and so forth, and then to read up on the subject. But of the "Reformed world-and-life view" I hear almost nothing when food is under discussion. The Reformed lifestyle does not seem to extend to diet. The range of opinion on diet that is present in secular society is also present among us.

If I had to name one tradition within Christianity that is most likely to offer uniquely Christian insight into questions of food selection, it would be the Anabaptists and Mennonites. I use both words because not all Anabaptists call themselves Mennonites. I could speak simply of Anabaptists, but this term has polemical connotations: one is supposed to detest and reject the horrible errors of the Anabaptists.

Today many Christians look to the Anabaptists and Mennonites with appreciation because of their leadership in a number of practical dimensions of the Christian life, including peace-making and conflict-resolution, disaster relief in various parts of the world, the promotion of stewardly farming practices, and the Mennonite cookbooks which every Christian housewife should have on her shelf. The Mennonites seem to know something about keeping the old ways alive and living close to the land. They appreciate what God has given us and are determined to preserve it for coming generations.

In Mennonite literature one can also read arguments to the effect that the diet of the typical North American claims too great a share of the world's nutritional resources. If we would "eat lower on the food chain," by avoiding or cutting down on meat, there would be more food for the hungry. In our time, other Christian traditions and churches have begun to take such arguments seriously. Thus many Reformed folks would also affirm that hunger abroad has something today with food selection right here at home.

A philosophy of food?

To some it may seem incongruous to link two such words as "philosophy" and "food." In the literature on food selection, I have seen it done on occasion. Nowadays one can link philosophy with almost any type of human activity. The question "What is your approach to investing?" can be rephrased "What is your philosophy of investing?" But when I talk about philosophy in connection

with food selection I have something a little different in mind, namely, questions of practical epistemology.

I would like to think that specifically Christian philosophy has something to say about food selection. I hesitate somewhat because the adjective "Christian," when applied to philosophy, is basically an honorific. The issue is not usually whether the philosopher in question is a Christian but whether his ideas and theories achieve a certain standard in terms of intellectual insight, rigor, and ability to inspire people. Thus one might claim to be writing Christian philosophy only to find the claim rejected by readers who are not impressed.

Therefore I will follow a more modest route in this essay and explain simply how certain elements in my own course "Introduction to Philosophy" are relevant to questions of food selection. I am not now thinking in terms of ethical arguments having to do with stewardship and the need to share the earth's nutritional resources. I do respect such arguments, but I spend almost no time on such issues in my course. What I do deal with, however, is the question of what it means to say that something is scientifically proven or established. For a great many people, science is the highest authority we have nowadays and therefore plays quite a role in food selection.

Scoffers

Much of the literature in bookstores and health food stores that tries to influence us in food selection is optimistic and upbeat. A particular diet and eating pattern is the key to health: a bright future awaits you if you follow the suggested plan. But there is also some downbeat literature that is strikingly reminiscent of a certain strain of writing in the philosophical tradition. It argues, essentially, that one cannot be sure which foods contribute to health and which ones undermine it. Or perhaps, in more limited terms, such literature claims that only "Science" has any hope of coming to reliable conclusions on this matter: the man in the street is out of his depth when he tries to do some independent thinking on the subject.

The layman's access to Science in its bearing on diet and health comes mainly through medical doctors. And such doctors are slow to make dietary pronouncements, apart from the old line about the so-called "food groups." In the experience of many people, doctors tend to throw cold water over our hopes of improving our health through dietary change. Many of them seem ill-informed about new dietary approaches, having received little instruction in nutritional matters during their professional training. And in cases where they have indeed heard of dietary remedies, e.g. in the treatment of cancer, they tend

to be quite skeptical. Therefore food enthusiasts can often be heard complaining about the doctors they have dealt with.

When I think over this situation, I am reminded of the developments with regard to cigarettes that I have experienced during my lifetime. When I was a very young child smoking was widely accepted; some people didn't like the smell, but it was not a recognized health issue. By the time I became a teenager back in the 1960s, the US government was sending out the word that smoking was harmful to human health and was therefore to be avoided. I believed the warning, and I have never smoked. But many did not believe it then and persisted in their skepticism for decades. Again and again we got to hear that it was not "scientifically proven" that smoking would harm you. Only recently have the big tobacco companies begun to retreat from this skeptic's refrain.

Now, since observation reveals quite a correlation between smoking heavily and suffering from breathing problems, one could well wonder just what is meant by "scientifically proven." That's where philosophy enters the picture. It shows science to be a type of official corporate knowledge, parallel to the judgments regarding crimes which are handed down in courts of law.

The courts of the land are a vexation for many an honest citizen concerned to see justice done. It seems that in many cases evil-doers wiggle off the hook. Sometimes a "legal technicality" is alleged, and in some cases the evidence that looks convincing to the man in the street is judged to be less than conclusive in the courtroom. The upshot is that it is "not proven" that the accused committed the crime in question. The citizenry is outraged: we all know he did it!

Frustrated citizens sometimes feel the impulse to "take the law into their own hands" when the courts let them down. In rare cases they even mete out some vigilante justice. I do not wish to encourage or condone such action. But in the case of food selection, growing numbers of men and women in the street are indeed taking the law (or the decision-making, to be more exact) into their own hands. They are refusing to wait any longer for the "scientific proof" that certain foods are beneficial or harmful and are taking action in relation to those foods.

Those citizens must then endure the jeers of the scoffers. One such scoffer is Scott Mowbray, the author of a book entitled *The Food Fight: Truth, Myth, and the Food-Health Connection* (Toronto: Random House, 1992). Note the scorn in the title: the debate between advocates of different dietary approaches has about as much significance as the scene in a junior high school cafeteria where

the kids are throwing food at one another. Nutrition, in Mowbray's terms, has been "factionalized" (p. 31).

Sometimes the misbehavior of children should simply be ignored. Mowbray seems to think that we should also ignore the well-intended but misguided preachments of the food enthusiasts who write books. When it comes to dietary advice, it is best to leave it to the people in a position to know, namely, the scientifically-informed experts. The sad reality of the situation, according to Mowbray, is that we are virtually drowning in a flood of unreliable health and diet books. The authors of those books form an "unofficial Fellowship of the Regimen" whose ranks are wide open: "Anyone -- physician, journalist, preacher, radical, kook -- may join this ecumenical fellowship, just by writing a popular book propounding a food and health system. There are no criteria for truthfulness or usefulness; any book, by virtue of being published, immediately becomes part of the expanding Canon of the Regimen." [p. 73]

The food reformers and health-food enthusiasts give themselves away by their procedures and methods, argues Mowbray: "... in health-food writing, experience constitutes credentials. Faith overcomes the need for a more orderly or complete explanation. Stories substitute for experiment, singular examples for statistics, travelogues for epidemiology, tradition for proof. Myths -- of Edens past and present -- replace history." [p. 104]

The problem, as Mowbray sees it, is that it is well-nigh impossible to keep the amateurs on the sidelines. Nutrition scientists operate in the same manner as other sciences: they "...guard the integrity of their memberships and the education through accreditation, peer-review journals, and the like" But the amateur in the field is not bound by established procedures. Mowbray shakes his head sadly and observes: "No need to see a doctor for nutrition advice! It flows freely from media `experts,' from the labels on the food we bring into our homes, from oatmeal advertisements on television, and from friends who have read books or know opinionated people who might have read them." [p. 69]

The well-meaning but inept amateur nutritionist is a "generalist." There is no place for his approach, for scientific questions today need to be broken down into separate parts if they are to be tackled properly. Mowbray drifts into philosophy as he discusses the questions of holism vs. atomism (see pp. 196-7, 238-50). In opposition to confused holistic thinking, Mowbray advocates what he calls "the Baconian way," which endeavors "... to control nature by interpreting it as nothing but a series of chemical reactions" (p. 148). Vitalism is also among the objects of Mowbray's scorn (see pp. 117, 119). And I was not

surprised to read that Descartes needs to be defended against the misconceptions spread by the adherents of holistic approaches (see p. 238).

In Christian colleges we hear a good deal about "reductionism" and its dangers. Mowbray is convinced that without reductionism we wouldn't have good science. And without good science we would not have reliable insight into issues of nutrition: "... the complexity of scientific problems requires that they be broken down into smaller problems. When the problem is the human body, reductionism leads to the examination of very small events: the interaction of molecules." However much the food reformers and the people who talk holistic language may hate to hear such words, we need to affirm, according to Mowbray, that "food *is* fuel; the heart *is* a pump; the surgeon *is* a mechanic" (p. 248).

It is sometimes said that a nation languishing under bad government deserves what it gets: somehow the people have brought their plight upon themselves. Mowbray seems to feel the same way about people who have been duped by the health-food enthusiasts. He does not plead for government crackdowns on alternative approaches to health and nutrition. The public has made its choice, and the public, it appears, is itself to blame. Mowbray observes: "With one or two exceptions, the buying public has shown a strong preference for the radical reform message over the budding orthodox/scientific nutritional line." [p. 95]

Mowbray's book also includes passing commentary on many foods which the enthusiasts either recommend or oppose. A favorite theme of many enthusiasts is the importance of fiber in one's diet. Mowbray's dismissal of the fiber thesis is typical of how he deals with practical dietary advice that does not have the backing of the scientific establishment. He writes: "When researcher Dennis Burkitt reported the low incidence of colon cancer in Africa, he set off a brushfire of enthusiasm for fiber in the West. The crudest reduction of the message was 'Eat more bran,' a message that proved enormously lucrative, principally because it ignored the complexity of the fiber issue. The truth is, there are many kinds of fiber, the differences between African and North American diets and lifestyles are many and meaningful, and the final word on fiber's role in cancer is certainly not in." [pp. 265-6] The message seems to be: you kids just wouldn't understand -- it's kind of complicated.

Beware of quacks

Even sterner than Mowbray in his denunciation of the enthusiasts and reformers is Victor Herbert, who also appeals to the need for epistemology and logic and the sound use of reason. Herbert's book is entitled *Nutrition Cultism:*

Facts and Fiction (Philadelphia: George F. Stickley Company, third printing, 1981).

Herbert follows in the footsteps of certain scientists and philosophers who want to distinguish the crackpots and quacks (Herbert's preferred term) from the practitioners of orthodox and accredited science. But whereas Mowbray believes it's a free country in which people have to take responsibility for what they do and do not believe, Herbert is more inclined to say: "There oughta be a law." The public needs to be protected: "The public is unable to tell the difference between anecdote and science." Herbert wants facts -- not stories: "Anecdotal and testimonial evidence is as worthless in medicine and it is in law, where it is excluded from courts as hearsay." [p. 134] One of his headings is "Worthlessness of anecdotal and testimonial claims" (p. 33; see also pp. 9, 134).

Dietary claims and changes need to be based on scientific research and experimentation, which gets reported in genuine scientific periodicals -- not the shady publications of the food reformers. But how is one to know the difference. Herbert: "The scientist knows which journals are scientific and which ones are not. The layman may not know this. But the quack does not care about the quality of his sources of information. He merely accepts any findings which appear to support him and rejects any evidence which contradicts his ideas." [p. 78] The nutrition quack is a dangerous fellow. Another of Herbert's headings is "Nutrition quackery as murder" (p. 43; see also pp. 78ff).

If the evidence to which the quacks appeal is worthless, scientifically speaking, so are the conclusions they reach. Herbert complains: "Most of the nutrition 'advice' given to the public in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and popular books ranges from deceptive and misleading to downright fraudulent." [p. 9] Note that he does not say: *all*. A small proportion of the dietary advice given to the public is based on science. He even objects to the term "health food store." The store that labels itself as such has no more right to the title than the local supermarket (see p. 84).

What is proof?

Mowbray, Herbert and other such writers operate with a definition of "proof" that is very hard to implement and apply in the food selection business. The ideal in their brand of scientific testing is to have two groups of subjects in which all factors are the same except for the one being tested. In a double blind study, moreover, the people being tested must be kept in the dark as to which

one is receiving the stuff or food being tested and which one is the control group. I do not deny for a moment that there is value in such studies. But there are so many factors at work in the body's response to nutrients, including the nutritional history of the individual in question, that it is well-nigh impossible to assure oneself that the two groups are identical except in the one respect that is relevant to the test or experiment. And then there is the problem of the amount of time it would take to test thoroughly: long-term effects of foods and nutrients may not manifest themselves for many years.

These considerations do not appear to deter Herbert from taking a stern line. Just as drugs are potentially harmful and should not be licensed for use on the general public before thorough testing has been done, so food remedies have to be *proven safe* before they can be made available. The rule to be followed is: "... no alleged nutrition remedy is safe until proved to be safe, or effective until proved to be effective." [p. 13; see also p. 141]

It seems to me that the question of *safety* has to be separated from the question of *effectiveness*. That which shows itself to be unsafe for one or more persons is surely suspect. But when it comes to effectiveness, we face a different situation. Food enthusiasts often find that a food-based remedy for a particular ailment that works on one person does not work for another. They usually recommend such remedies with a note of caution, saying, in effect: "This has worked well for me. Why don't you give it a try?" Most food reformers know from experience how different we human beings are from one another, and they are quite content to see different people pursuing better health through different dietary reforms. They would not like to see a potential remedy outlawed simply because it did not prove effective for *some* of the people who tried it.

Most food reformers are not philosophers, or philosophically schooled. But those who do know some philosophy are inclined to say, with Scripture, that we still "see through a glass darkly" (I Corinthians 13:12) and therefore should not speak too dogmatically about what can and cannot be the case. They favor a spirit of experiment -- not just the type of experiment of which Herbert would approve, but also the more informal variety in which we try out a new food and watch for a change in our health which the new food may have brought about. If there is a favorable change, we may or may not have a theory as to why it came about. Sometimes we simply say: "I don't know why this works for me, but it does; perhaps it will work for you too."

The believer

Belief does not only refer to faith in Christ; it also has a bearing on the confidence we have in the senses and the reasoning ability God has given us. There are some people so plagued by fear and doubt and skepticism that they dare not try to reflect on their own experience. I do not number myself among them. Instead I maintain that an adult human being must be able to make changes for the better in his overall life situation on the basis of what he experiences and what he can learn from his experience through patient reflection. And he should not allow himself to be deterred or immobilized by "experts" or accredited scientists who tell him that he is a mere child, cognitively speaking.

This piece of practical philosophy, or philosophy of life, as some might prefer to call it, also applies to food selection. Among the enthusiasts and the food reformers and the people who suggest recipes are a number of thoughtful folks who share the confidence of which I speak here. One of the most impressive of them is Annemarie Colbin, whose book *Food and Healing* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986) represents a wonderful mix of the practical and the spiritual (in a broader, not necessarily Christian, sense). Colbin is clearly a believer in the sense in which I am using the term here.

Colbin quotes Francis Bacon in favor of her program of listening to one's own body and learning from it. Bacon had written: "There is a wisdom in [the body] beyond the rules of physic. A man's own observations, what he finds good of and what he finds hurt of, is the best physic to preserve health." [p. 208] And Colbin is convinced that *individuality* is a major consideration in such efforts. We have inward access to feedback from our own body; with that access comes responsibility. Colbin maintains that we need to listen to the signals which our body is sending us: "In our quest for healing ourselves with food, only individually can each of us decide what makes us feel better and what not, and when." [p. 210]

This emphasis on individuality means that Colbin is far removed from any "one size fits all" approach to food selection. There are different body types, and they need different diets (see p. 121).

Moreover, each body has a history, which means that its needs will change over time. She even uses the term "eclectic" in connection with diet (see p. 211). Listen to your body, Colbin advises: "You should always take into account where *you* are at this point in time" [p. 208] Colbin is favorably inclined toward a number of the diets that compete for allegiance among the food reformers; she suggests that one may change from one of these to another at some point when the body seems to have become sluggish: "The time that is

most highly indicated for a change in diet is when you are feeling stuck and need out." [p. 208]

Colbin's book represents an interesting counterpart to the broad accusations in Mowbray and Herbert because of the tremendous flexibility she advocates. She affirms: "One of the most important concepts I hope to put across is that *there is no one diet that is right for everyone all the time*. It is crucial that each person contemplating a change in diet monitor his or her own body's feedback, the feelings of `okay' or `not okay'." [p. 10]

What is involved in such "monitoring"? Colbin's explanation is fairly brief; part of her answer is that Eugene Gendlin's writings are helpful here. What she herself tells us begins with the following emphasis: "... *pay attention* to everything you eat and to how you feel right afterward and up to twenty-four hours later." [p. 208] In judging how you feel or react, it is important to distinguish between what tastes good and what the body receives well; these two are by no means the same. She observes: "Ice cream may be delicious but will not necessarily evoke an `OK' feeling." [p. 209]

Colbin is convinced that a good deal of potential information comes our way constantly. The problem is that many of us do not know how to receive or interpret that inward information stream: "We each know much more about ourselves than we realize. The problem is that the knowledge is nonverbal; that is, it is not intellectual or rational. Our deepest self-knowledge resides in the body, which a great deal of the time does not speak the same language as the mind. Our senses are directed outward, and no sensory nerves are connected to the major organs that support life. Therefore the only `body information' we get are vague sensations and generalized signals." [p. 208] Our society, generally speaking, does not value such signals from within but instead encourages us to look to medical and scientific specialists to report on our inwardness.

I was already practicing such "listening to the body" before I encountered Colbin's book. For me the book represented both a confirmation and a deepening of a useful way of thinking about health and nutrition.

In reflecting on what Colbin is getting at, I would like to insert the word "normative awareness" into the discussion. I believe there is such a thing, although it is fallible, just as sensory perception is fallible. Both have the capacity to connect us to truth. And both are to be interpreted as good gifts of God that must be nurtured and developed. Through these two avenues of knowledge, God enables us to gather some of the truth we need for everyday life. And he does not intend that people should rely exclusively on a body of

experts to mediate between themselves and their inner sensations, any more than he asks us to look to a body of Bible experts to determine, day by day, what his Word means for our lives.

In these respects, then, I try to integrate Colbin's "body epistemology" (my term, not hers) into the larger task of Christian philosophy. That larger task includes a process of liberation: people today need to be liberated from the impulse to suppose that when it comes to their body and health and nutrition, they may only believe what the scientific establishment has authorized as sound, as though only abstract, specialized, theoretical thought had value. Common sense and naive experience need to be defended today.

A Reformed diet?

I began this essay with some critical comments on Reformed thinking and the "Reformed world-and-life view." While the notion of a Reformed diet may sound silly to some, I believe I have given some indication of how Reformed notions in epistemology may influence food selection.

We often hear it said that a Reformed church must be a *reforming* church. The task of reformation is never done. This emphasis sounds a lot like Colbin on food selection: don't be afraid to experiment and change. And so the appropriate conclusion is that we should not aim for a *reformed* diet (remember the dangers of past-participle thinking, on which I commented in an earlier issue of *Myodicy*) but for a *reforming* diet. May the writings of Annemarie Colbin and other food-reformers (there's that root-word again!) help you along the way. Bon appetit!