Why Not Use Rice in Making the Host?

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As a Rabbi once accused of being "too soft on the Catholic Church"—liking Catholicism too much to make that particular Lutheran comfortable—I read with special sensitivity the report of how a young girl and her family left the Catholic Church for a liturgical reason, of all things.

It seems—so the Associated Press reports—a young girl suffers from coeliac disease, which causes her to get sick from eating gluten, a protein in wheat and other grains. She can safely eat rice. But Church law requires the Host to be made of wheat, so the family left the Church and went Methodist "where the rules on communion are more flexible because Methodists believe the bread and wine are symbolic, not the actual transubstantiated body and blood of Jesus." That's how the AP reported the case.

The Church position is explained by a spokesman for the Boston Archdiocese in this language: "Bread is central to the Eucharist because of the imagery of Scripture, because of the prayers of the Christian community going back thousands of years." The Vatican takes the matter seriously enough that, in 1994, it issued rules for all bishops to follow. Among them: "Special hosts (which do not contain gluten) are invalid matter for the celebration of the Eucharist." And, the AP continued, citing the Parish priest involved in the case, "I think part of the problem is we are so accustomed to all these little round, pre-cut hosts we've lost any real sense we're taking part in one loaf," says the Rev. Austin Fleming, pastor of Our Lady of Christian Help Church in Concord. "We many are sharing one bread and becoming one with Christ. We can't make different flavours for different folks and maintain that theological reality."

Far be it from a Rabbi to intervene in canon law and liturgy, but there is another explanation to consider. It is in two parts, historical and doctrinal.

First, the Eucharist derives from the Last Supper, so the Church has always maintained, and the Last Supper corresponds to a Passover Seder. Now, as a matter of fact, matzah, the unleavened bread of the Passover Seder, can be prepared only from wheat or kindred grains of the same classification. To fulfil one's obligation to eat unleavened bread, the bread must be capable of leavening but not leavened, so Mishnah-tractate Pesahim 2:5: "These are types of grains through bread made from which a person fulfils his obligation to eat unleavened bread on Passover: (1) wheat, (2) barley, (3) spelt, (4) rye, and (5) oats." What the five named grains have in

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01752.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

common is that all ferment.

But, second, that doesn't tell the whole story. For what else is the use of grains that ferment required? The answer is, dough-offering taken from dough prepared from the same five species of grain must be given while the dough is being prepared, but if the dough is made from other species, dough-offering is not separated from the dough; it is exempt. And what are the included, and what the excluded grains? Loaves of bread made from five types of grain are subject to dough offering: (1) wheat, (2) barley, (3) spelt, (4) oats, and (5) rye; lo, loaves of bread made from these species are subject to dough offering, so Mishnah-tractate Hallah 1:1.

And what about rice? It is explicitly excluded, so Mishnah-tractate Hallah 1:4: The following are exempt from dough-offering: rice, sorghum, poppy, sesame, and pulse. What these have in common is obvious: they do not respond to the enzymes that engender life in the mixture of water and flour of wheat and the companion grains. To this Hallah 3:7 adds, One who makes dough from a mixture of wheat flour and rice flour— if it, i.e., the dough, has the taste of cereal wheat, it is subject to dough offering. And a person fulfils his obligation to eat unleavened bread on Passover by means of eating it. But if it does not have the taste of cereal, it is not subject to dough offering. And a person does not fulfil his obligation to eat unleavened bread of Passover by means of eating it.

Wheat-flour differs from rice in the fundamental way already noted: wheat sustains the natural processes by which life is sustained, life commences: that is, when through the process of fermentation that starts when water is mixed with flour and yeast and ends when the dough forms a crust. That marks the point at which the fermentation process ends, the enzyme in the yeast having died in the heat of the baking. The Halakhah emerges at the end of a long process of profound thought on the nature of life-processes. Its message is simple. When the enzyme is activated with the addition of water to the flour, and the fermentation process begun, the obligation to separate dough-offering is incurred, but must be met at the end, when the enzyme dies and the fermentation process concludes.

I cannot think of a more vivid way of linking the obligation to separate dough-offering to the fermentation-process. Such a process must be possible—hence the five species but no others—and it must be underway. Then the consideration of God's share in the dough registers. Or to put it somewhat materially, when the flour is brought to life by water and yeast, then God's claim on the bread registers. The dough, when alive and expanding, encompasses a share belonging to God. That is to be removed and given to the priest.

What all this has to do with the Host of wheat is now obvious, and it is not mere custom but theological truth: the logic of the faith that deems the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01752.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

body of Christ to be really present in the Host. If I had to explain on behalf of the Archdiocese of Boston why the Host must be made of wheat flour, I would not suffice with appeals to Scripture and prayer. These are true but too general, not specific to the case.

Rather, I would seize upon the substance of the issue. It is in two parts.

First, the Host is explicitly unleavened bread, because that is how Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The definitive trait of unleavened bread, broken "in memory of Me," is that it derives from wheat, which can have leavened but has not leavened.

And, second comes the theological reason: the Host is made of wheat because wheat ferments and contains the mystery of life, represented in the here and now by the working of the enzyme on the flour and water. From there, the lesson follows: the Host is source of life not in a symbolic way but in a real way, as the Catholic Church has always maintained. The Halakhah of Judaism in its context and for its reasons concurs on the logic that requires for the dough-offering given to the priests, and for the matzah eaten at the Passover Seder, bread made of a grain that participates in the processes of fermentation, that is to say, life.

Two Unresolved Issues for the Third Millennium

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A number of important theological issues remain controverted and unresolved as we begin the third millennium; two particularly crucial ones will be the focus of this essay. The first has been of special concern to Roman Catholic theologians, but has wider religious and cultural implications for the 21st century as well. The second is rooted more deeply in the last centuries of the second millennium, and certainly crosses denominational lines; it will, I think, be of continuing importance for faith and theology in the new millennium.

The first topic concerns an issue in fundamental moral theology which has serious implications in the context of what technology in the 21st century is and will be capable of achieving in terms of the manipulation of our world, others, and ourselves. Its dilemma is succinctly stated by James

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01752.x Published online by Cambridge University Press