

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 15 May 2019

## Religion, Food Waste and Food Consumption



Podcast with **Anna Sofia Salonen** (20 May 2019).

Interviewed by **Mariia Alekseevskaia**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-food-waste-and-food-consumption/>

**Mariia Alekseevskaia (MA):** *Hello. This is the Religious Studies Project. My name is [Maria Alekseevskaia](#). I'm a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Ottawa, Canada. It's my pleasure to welcome, today, a doctor of theology and a postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University in Finland, [Anna Sofia Salonen](#) who has recently come to Ottawa for her research. Anna has been conducting her studies at the intersection of theology and the social sciences – and food has been a persistent theme. Anna's [PhD thesis](#) explored food charities in the city of Tampere, while focussing on the perspectives and viewpoints of the food recipients. Since last year, Anna Salonen has been involved in a research project that embraces both religious and non-religious populations and (aims to) understand the ethics of daily food consumption in a context of an affluent society. Today we are going to talk about food waste, food consumption and their relation to religion, health, identity and ethical concerns. Our conversation will be a partial continuation of the [discussion](#) about food and religion that was started at the Religious Studies Project in 2013, when [Michel Desjardins](#), Professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfred Laurier University, was interviewed. We'll start the discussion: could you please first recount how and why you have become interested in the intersection of food and religion?*

**Anna Salonen (AS):** Yes, thank you. So for a long time I've been interested in how religious organisations engage in helping those people who live in weak social and economic positions in society. And, from very early on in my studies, I started to pay attention to the fact that in Finland, as well as in many other countries, they do so particularly by giving people food. And this is, of course, nothing new. Religious organisations have shared the idea of sharing food throughout their history. But still I think that, in the era of unprecedented material affluence, it has been striking to see that there seems to be an ever-growing need, and also ever-growing supply, for faith-based food assistance – even in affluent well-fed societies. So my interest in the intersections between religion and food started from these observations.

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**MA:** *And how does research about food consumption, in the context of religious practices or just everyday experience, help us better understand the human being?*

**AS:** That's a good question. I consider eating as an interesting locus for research since it surfaces at the dichotomy between individualism on one hand, and responsibility and collective action on the other. As the German sociologist [Georg Simmel](#) has noted: eating is an exceptional sphere of life in that in it one has to forgo, absolutely, that which the other person eats. Actually, according to Simmel, it is only the Eucharist that enables us eat the same mysterious unbroken whole. So, outside this kind of extreme situation of the Eucharist, I can never eat exactly what you are eating. But at the same time as this kind-of banal individualism, eating is universal in that everybody must eat. And it is this quite trivial fact that enables food to have such a tremendous social and societal significance. And, in addition, I think that studying religion and food not only helps us to better understand human beings, but it also contributes to understanding our relations with non-human animals and with the non-human world – particularly the questions of what we eat or not, or who we eat or not.

**MA:** *Thank you. And turning back to this old podcast in 2013 when Canadian Professor Michel Desjardins was interviewed. . . . He said that, unfortunately, not much research had been done on the topic of food and religion, but he predicted that this field is most likely to attract more scholars and produce more literature in the future. How do you describe and assess the current status of this field of religion and food?*

**AS:** So I had a chance to listen to that podcast, too. And I agree with a lot that Professor Desjardins said in his interview. I will not repeat it all here, but I maybe suggest other people to listen to that podcast, too. As one answer to your question, when it comes to the lack of research on food in the field of sociology of religion there are certain historical traits behind it. So first, the differentiation of Christianity and food is related to the differentiation of Christianity from other religions, particularly from Judaism. So, historically, Christianity has (distanced itself) from food rules in order to draw boundaries to other religions. And, further into the history of sociology of religion, Christianity – and particularly the Protestant form of Christianity – became the paradigm for religion. So it's the lens through which we approach religion – or used to approach religion. And this led researchers to focus more on belief and less on ordinary bodily practice. But, luckily, this has been changing recently, for example, with the rise of lived religion approaches in sociology of religion. So we concentrate nowadays more on the everyday lived experiences of people, and that also relates to food. And also, I wish to point out that there is, or has been, a bunch of research particularly on the role of food in many non-Christian traditions – even though the question has not become a mainstream issue in the study of

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religion. And as another point: myself, I wouldn't consider the study of religion and food so much as a sub-field but rather as a bridging and bonding within and between research fields. So, one of the challenges of the research on food consumption is that it did spread over multiple fields. But I think it's also a chance for research. Because food provides a tool for us to engage in ongoing boundary work between different academic fields. And one of its benefits is that it can . . . the study of food can make visible the relevance of knowledge gained from studying religion, in other (fields) than Religious Studies. For example: myself, I am a theologian and sociologist of religion. But I work a lot with people studying religion, culture, nutrition, sociology, social and public policy, for example. I've been learning from those approaches. But also, I think I've been able to give some new perspectives in those respective fields. So I see this topic as an inter-disciplinary, rather than a sub-disciplinary venture.

**MA:** *And for your PhD thesis you studied food charity organisations in Finland. Could you say a few words about your findings, and explain the ambivalence of the position of food recipients that you emphasised throughout your thesis.*

**AS:** Yes. So in my PhD research I studied food charity at the interface between religious organisations and people seeking for material assistance. What I wanted to know first was how religion is manifest in food charity venues, which are often run by religious organisations, and how the food aid recipients respond to the religious elements that they face in these venues. But secondly, I also analysed the social position of the food aid recipients in the context of affluent consumer society. And what I found out was that the recipients of charitable food aid live in an ambivalent position, where they are both excluded from, and dependent on the prevailing practices of consumer culture. So, it's a system where the food aid relies on surplus food coming from the food markets – so it's that food that we, the more affluent consumers, choose not to eat. So in this kind of a situation the food recipients are excluded from having consumer choice, but they are dependent on the wasteful food system which is producing the preconditions of what they receive. So in our society, food is simultaneously so cheap that it can be thrown away, but so expensive that so many of us cannot afford it. So that's the paradox. And so a food charity is a social practice that produces ambivalent social positions for its users. And religious organisations are actively involved in this work. So what I think is interesting is that religious organisations become actors, not only in welfare provision, but also in the disposal end of the food system. And this is something that has not been studied with data.

**MA:** *And now you're involved in a multi-year research on ethical eating and food consumption in affluent societies such as Finland and Canada. And could you describe the main goals of your new*

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*research, in a nutshell?*

**AS:** Yes. So, in a nutshell, the study starts from the fact that contemporary food system routinely produces more food than we are able to consume. While social stratification is probably nowhere more apparent than in food waste – what we eat and how we eat – yet still, in many affluent societies even the poorest consume too much natural resources. So, in the midst of this kind of ambiguity, we are constantly invited to exhibit our identity, our values and our personality through food choices. So my study explores the content and construction of the ethical lives of ordinary people living in such contexts. I'm asking what people consider to be moderate with regards food consumption and analyse how they construct these views. So I'm engaging in discussions of moderation, which is a cardinal virtue of antiquity or Christian theology, but I'm contextualising it through this current affluent society. This is a three-year project funded by the Academy of Finland and it's based in Tampere University.

**MA:** *And is how you are connected to Canada, or not?*

**AS:** Yes, so for part of this research I'm visiting here, in the Classics and Religious Studies (department), and I'm also collecting some of my data here in Canada, yes.

**MA:** *And so now we're going to talk about the data and your collection of it. I know you have shifted in focus in this current research from religious groups to “nones” or non-religious populations. What is the methodology of your research? Do you interview people – and in that case, how do you choose who to interview?*

**AS:** OK. Thank you. This is an interesting and very puzzling question. Currently I'm conducting qualitative interviews to learn about people's practices, stories, opinions, related to food and eating. Previous studies on ethical food consumption primarily focus on those people who commit to certain ethical food choices like buying organic or local food and so forth. But less attention has been paid to ordinary people or – quote unquote – “non-ethical” consumers, as they are sometimes referred to in research. So there is a need to study also people who do not necessarily, or primarily, base their food choices on particular ethical ideals. And what I try to do in this study is to include those “nones” of ethical consumption in my research. So right now I'm gathering interviews with people who live in one selected neighbourhood, here in Ottawa. Previous research has noted that place plays a role in maintaining and reproducing class stratified food practices, yet if we target on diverse neighbourhoods then we also get diverse voices. So I used this approach to target diverse voices and views of ordinary people.

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**MA:** *How do your respondents feel when you ask them about food consumption and, more, about food waste? Perhaps some of them feel guilt or shame?*

**AS:** Yes. So already, so far, it has become apparent that food is an emotionally-charged topic. Questions relating to food surplus and food waste evoke negative feelings. People tend to feel bad about food waste in general, and also about themselves having to waste food. And I think this is important in affluent societies where the majority of food waste is actually produced on the household level. So it is us, the ordinary consumers, who produce most of food waste. And one of the reasons is simply that we can afford to do so. And this causes negative emotional responses, such as anxiety and guilt. And it's interesting to learn more about how people deal with these emotions – how we go about our lives with this kind of continuous burden of guilt. Another thing that I find interesting, already, is that my respondents have noted that in the contemporary world, food is very private – an intimate issue. So as one of my interviewees pointed out, “Food is like religion. You can cook for people but you can't tell them how to live.” So I think that is just a fascinating approach to these questions. So people find it hard to address ethically dilemmatic questions with others in their communities, even though they would feel that it is an important thing to tackle.

**MA:** *Do you still keep in mind and take into consideration the religious affiliation of your respondents or . . . how do you choose, depending on their religious affiliation or not?*

**AS:** So I do not select my interviewees based on their religious background, but I do ask their religious background in the background questioning. So I get some information, also, about their religious affiliations, or none. So when it comes to religions, I think the study provides new knowledge of the practices and views of those people who do not necessarily, or primarily, identify as religious. And I think this study also gives insights in understanding whether, and to what degree, food consumption is lived as either religious or non-religious practice. So, in other words, the study counter-poses research on lived religion and lived non-religion – which is a topical question in the sociology of religion, right now.

**MA:** *I think we need to finish our conversation. To conclude, I wanted to ask you to give few tips and suggestions to those researchers, or students, who are working on, or willing to work at, the intersection of food and religion, or non-religion.*

**AS:** Ok. I'm going to give one warning and one suggestion! First, a warning. I do not think that we ought to say that food consumption equals religion. This is something that I want to stress. So I don't think that food or eating constitutes some kind of a new religion. It's simply mistaken to state that

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religion would reduce the food consumption or that food waste could somehow reflect or symbolise religion. So instead, what I'm suggesting is just that food consumption can serve as a point of departure for research to understand the currents of religion, ok? And, as such, there are many interesting avenues to study. Then, as a suggestion, I would like to encourage us to focus not only on individual people, but also on societal and discursive practices that revolve around food consumption. So how do we, as societies, speak about food and treat our food? Through what kinds of institutions do contemporary practices and ethics of food consumption materialise? And how do these things help us to understand religion and non-religion in today's world?

**MA:** *Thank you very much for this interview. And I wish you all the best with your current research, and with your further research – with your new ideas. And have a productive time, here in Canada!*

**AS:** Thank you.

**MA:** *Thank you.*

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