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A comparative Study on Eucharist and the Sacred Foods of the Major Religions

Abstract

We have chosen this topic because it relates to the Eucharist, a subject that the Romanian Patriarchate required to be analysed. We came to the conclusion that in all great religions there is the idea of "sacred food" that connects man with the divine world. By eating this food, man is consecrated and projected into the spiritual world, where he becomes a partner of the divine presence. To be more specific, we shall analyse different religions from this point of view. In the Eastern World, if we think of the Shinto faith, we can see that the bowl of rice offered through the Tori gate to the shrine of Amaterasu is a traditional Japanese sacred gesture. The plant called soma by the Indians and haoma by the Iranians is a plant with hallucinogenic properties when consumed. Its consumption produces an ecstatic mental state. In Sikhism prasad is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The elements foreshadowing Eucharist can also be found in the water of the Istros river that the Dacians drank before battle and in the offerings consumed in the Greco-Roman



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temples. Finally, the Jews created a number of dishes that refer to the sacralization of food. The kosher foods, the Easter foods, the foods associated with the major religious holidays, all these are about creating a sacred atmosphere. The Christian world is the Eucharistic fulfillment of humankind. All the attempts of spiritual food are absorbed in the Eucharist. There are big differences between all religious forms of spiritual nourishment and the great mystery of the Eucharist. There is no equivalence between them. Through the Sacrament of the Eucharist humanity changes, gets its ontological status because the communion gives man a divine structure. Man becomes a god by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. God enters the human and the human becomes godlike. No other food nor sacral complementarity does it lead to such a state. Man becomes God through the divine sacrament. This is the state that exceeds the material and it involves the sacredness and sacralization the man tends to.

Keywords

Eucharistie, communion, sacred food, interreligious dialogue

We believe that in human history there have always been ways of approaching God through various methods. Meditation, orans posture, asceticism and even food were possibilities to lessen the gap between Creator and creature, between the Divinity and the aspiring human condition. In the book of Genesis in the Holy Scripture both dialogue and food made the connection between man and the Creator. Man would communicate with God in two ways: by word and by food. *For the man in heaven food was a pretext of dialogue and its possibility.* God tells the man he can eat of every tree of heaven, because there is the communion of dialogue between the two.

God spoke to man in the garden, where food was eaten. Food was impregnated with theophanic and Word's presence. Man ate food, but at the same time he received the Word and the divine presence.

Unfortunately, the communion through food and logos was lost when *doubt* entered the human mind and the desire to be like God became a *magic act* by eating the forbidden fruit, or rather, the *delusion of disobedience*.

Man loses both the *dialogical status* with God and also the *communion meal* of God. Man loses the dialogue and the dialogue becomes monologue and the seeker shall eat bread by the sweat of his face. Food becomes the *telos of life* or the meaning of living. The means of earning bread becomes man's goal.

The fallen man will constantly look for the food that can revive his dialogue with God in order to restore the communion between them. Food remains the reference point because it bears the potential sacredness, i.e. the possibility of man's returning to the edenic state. Therefore we are seekers of God through food and we rediscover Him in the first instinct of life: the need to nurture oneself. Our chance to return to paradise-like normality lies in this basic instinct. All religions seek God and see food as a chance to recover that initial presence. We shall talk about these religions that seek the divine in the food. We shall start discussing the Eastern World religions.

In the Hindu belief system, the *sacred food* theme can be argued from the perspective of an Eucharistic meal. It may be too much to say "Eucharist foreshadowing Christ", yet the old Hindu had a *food of trance*, a *plant substance which facilitated the ecstatic encounter with the Divinity, with the transcendence*. This was called *soma*, a term borrowed from the ancient Persians, who called it *haoma*. Both *soma* and *haoma* described the same reality: the sanctifying plant substance from the distant past, widely spread in the Indo-Iranian world. This plant substance induced a deep religious feeling, a kind of trance derived from a drug substance. Today it is difficult to

identify the plant from which soma was produced as there are many botanical varieties and some of these plants grow in the East and some in America.

When the Aryans reached Northern India and pushed the Dravidians to the south of the continent, they brought with them a number of practices and beliefs. For example, they brought the idea of *dharma* or unchangeable law that cannot be superseded and must be obeyed to the letter. It is a kind of assumed fatalism. They also introduced the notion of *varna* or the belief in the four broad ranks into which traditional Hindu society is divided. The Aryans occupied the two top positions: the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, whereas the Dravidians were Vaishyas or Shudras, i.e. those who worked in order to support the two upper classes. Another Aryan practice referred to the consumption of soma in order to attain spiritual ecstasy.

In the Iranian world *haoma* was in fact the goddess who patronized the plant whose consumption allegedly led to a transcending experience. Eating this sacrosanct plant was a religious practice and Goddess Haoma was also worshipped at the same time. By this practice, the follower received power and wisdom, which made man a warrior, as martialism was man's main attribute. Pregnant women also consumed this plant substance, believing that their womb became sacred, the baby would be born healthy and lead a spiritual life. The art of preparing this juice was touched by the religious atmosphere in which invocations/incantations, mantras and secret rituals were performed. These practices were orally transmitted so that the secret of this sacred juice should not be revealed.

Unfortunately, the passing of time made people forget how to produce soma, which plant was it made from and how to consume the sacred juice. In the Avesta (Yasna 9.1, 9.2, 10.4) there are some passages that talk about how to prepare and consume this juice. The plant was pressed and squeezed and then consumed during ritual. Some people argue that the plant was boiled or dried and prepared like tea. Once consumed, this

tea would alter the follower's state of consciousness and his physical and psychological reality.

The drink was prepared from a plant quite difficult to identify. There are many Haoma plants. One of them was called Ephedra, which some researchers identified as the soma in the nineteenth century. Ephedra plants are shrubs with red cone-berries and grow in the Southern Himalayas. The juice of these berries was supposed to induce/cause ecstasy. The Americans considered another type of soma plant that was used in the incantations of the native tribes. This plant was a cactus called *peyotl* (*Lophophora Williamsii*). When burnt, this plant discharged an intoxicating smoke which was inhaled by the initiated. The pre-Columbian Mexicans knew peyotl and consumed it as a juice in order to experience ecstasy. This drink was also offered to human sacrifices so that their heart sacrificing to the god Huitzilopochtli be less painful.

Some people consider it a mushroom, *Amanita Muscaria*, which dried or boiled, squeezed or burned, would discharge those psychoactive substances. In addition to the above mentioned plants there are at least twenty other candidates for the identity of soma, but nobody knows for sure which was the plant of the Vedic practice. Maybe there were many such plants, but their juice was more important for its trance qualities. Different ascetics consumed it in order to connect with the Divinity.

In Hinduism there is a so-called *Yajna*, a kind of chanting mantras, performed during the soma ritual. In fact, this is a sacred food offering to various deities. *Haotar*, the priest who recites the incantation, also reads Rig Veda invocations and lights a fire for the God *Agni* (god of fire). Different spices and sacrosanct potion were poured into the fire. It is a kind of offering to the gods, which involves offering food, flowers and even an ecstatic potion, imitating the soma.

Mystics and gurus are given alms like cannabis and hashis which they consume or smoke in order to attain the state of

trance. Researchers discuss extensively the *drug mysticism*¹. Such hallucinogenic substances would facilitate transcendental encounters with entities from beyond by their mere ingestion. On the banks of the River Ganges there are numerous cannabis-smoking ascetics meditating and waiting to be given alms courtesy of passers-by.

Offerings made to Agni and lighting of the sacred fire are officiated by a group of priests in temples. Agnistoma is the *yajna* of soma and it was offered to the god Agni. During the ceremony *devas* or divine beings were called upon. This beverage was considered the drink of the gods and the common man could connect to these deities by drinking soma and by worshipping them.

At present the soma practice is more symbolic and the hallucinogenic plants are seldom ingested by the religious extremists who use opium and cannabis to enter a state of trance. The arhats using such drugs as aids to spiritual experiences are exceptions that may refer to distant times when soma drinking was widespread. These ascetics still ingesting or smoking cannabis today seem to belong to a kind of contemporary Hindu shamanism.

In Hinduism *prasad* is considered *sacred food* and it is first offered to a deity and then distributed in His or Her name to their followers. Prasad is received by the devotee to be ingested in a ritualized context with prayer and meditation. As a spiritual state, *prasāda* has a rich history of meanings in the Sanskrit tradition from Vedic literature onwards. In this textual tradition, *prasada* is a mental state that connects human devotees and the divine gods and other powerful beings. Prasada is regarded as a concept of communion between humans and the gods, achieved by offerings. It is a process of giving and receiving between a human devotee and the divine god. Gods are offered flowers, fruits, vegetables, rice and milk

¹ Walter N. Panke, *Drugs and Mysticism*, in: „International Journal of Parapsychology”, volume VIII, no. 2, Spring, 1966, pp. 295-313.

and all this food is then considered to have the deity's blessing residing within it. The devotees receive from them the same food to be consumed. The deity "enjoying" or "tasting" a bit of the offering is actually a symbolic gesture known as *bhogya*. The prasada is consumed for purification and it is not everyday food.

In the Western area oriental movements like ISKCON are known for providing free prasada meals to all who come as a kind of proselytizing. Sometimes they appear to be feeding the poor. On a set up altar placed before the prasada table there is either a sacred image or a picture of God in any of His sacred forms, usually Krishna.

Also regarding the prasada there is the religious service called *puja*, which means adoration or worship. This can be performed either in the home or at temples, in the daily service or on a variety of occasions. Puja has been modeled around the idea of offerings made to deities and receiving their blessing in return. *Puja* varies according to the school of Hinduism by region, occasion, deity honored and steps followed. During the prayer ritual, the temple deity is invoked to meet his worshippers. When they go to the temple, people believe they go to the god's dwelling. At a temple puja, there is often less active participation, with the priest acting on behalf of others.

A puja prayer ritual can include several steps. The first step is *avahana* or invocation. *Asana* is next - both the worshipper and the invoked deity take a seat; *padhya* - the deity's feet are symbolically washed and the water is considered sacred. The same thing is true when the deity is replaced by a spiritual master, who is honored as the embodiment of a specific god. In such cases, the washing water is carefully managed and the devotees are allowed to taste it when necessary. Another step is *arghya*, when water is offered so the deity may wash its face and mouth. In Hinduism rinsing the mouth is equivalent to purification of the senses. *Vastra* means "dressing the god", i.e. a silk cloth is wrapped around the statue. *Upaveeda* is *putting on the sacred thread* around the statue. The sacred thread is the

kusti thread worn by the Hindus around the waist. It signifies spiritual awakening and practicing this faith. Then perfumes and ointments are applied to the image and flowers are offered in order to receive god's grace. Dhupa refers to burning incense so as to create the religious atmosphere. A burning lamp is waved in front of the image and foods such as cooked rice, fruit, clarified butter and any vegetarian food are offered. *Pranama* means that the worshipper bows or prostrates himself before the image to offer homage and ask god for his blessing. The final step was circumambulation around the deity and then the worshippers take their leave. After the prayer the blessed food was shared by all present at the puja.

We find it intriguing that in the *Guru puja* a living person, a spiritual master was honored as a living god or seen as the embodiment of a specific deity. The same ritual is performed just as seriously before the image of a god as well as in front of the spiritual master. Perfume, money, flowers, ointments and food were offered to the guru, believing that the sacred relationship between spiritual master and disciple is thus achieved.

We can conclude by saying that from the Hindu viewpoint there is a *sacred food*. In a Vedic context this food had hallucinogenic effects, which created the illusion that the practitioner entered the world of gods. But the divine world is also trapped in samsara, the unending cycle of birth and death. To be more precise, this means gods are not immortal either. The post-Vedic thinking asserts that gods are worshipped as aids to escape transmigration, considering that gods themselves need to become united with Atman, the universal life-principle. They also need to transcend their condition and become one with the impersonal divine. For the mortals, such a god is a Buddha who compassionately refrains from entering nirvana (*bodhisattva*) in order to save others and to help them cutting the karmic ties. But gods themselves will enter another world.

We also need to remember that *prasada* or the sacred food of the puja ceremony is an offering made to a god's image or to a

live god embodied by a spiritual master or guru. Divinity is thus reduced to a human being. When guru becomes god, god's divinity is diminished. People try to find their own gurus and guru becomes god in this situation. This statement is an exaggeration to us since there are many gurus worshipped as god incarnate. Some of them proved to be false gurus who took advantage of simple people's possessions. They would gather wealth and also be accused of fraud in the Western Europe. Such a false guru was the spiritual leader of the Transcendental Movement who fled from America to Europe to escape the charge of tax evasion and money laundering.

It should also be noted that man belonging to the Eastern World also needs sacred food in order to feel connected to the divine. He believes that food purifies the body. Given the primordial revelation, food is considered as an opportunity to commune with God. Despite the numerous readings, this concept is to be found in various religions.

In *Japanese Zen* the sacred food refers to aesthetics and meditation. The Way of Tea, *chanoyu* is not just drinking tea, it is a way to self-discovery and meditation. This refined ritual uncovers the meditative side of the Zen practitioner as well as his spiritual aesthetics. The tea room (*chashitsu*), where tea is made and served in the presence of the seated guests, the art of flower arrangement, (*ikebana*), the traditional garment (*kimono*) and the vessels used in the ceremony, everything has a meditative significance referring to the idea of spiritual balance, which is the condition of perfection. The philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism can be appreciated in a Tea Ceremony. Buddhism implies purity and detachment, Taoism emphasizes the idea of living in harmony and Confucianism focuses on the correct order² in the universe. In the tea ceremony fire, water, wood, metal and earth are

² Eric Prideaux, *Tea to soothe the soul*, in: „The Japan Times”, no. 5 / 2002.

present, symbolizing the five elements of Taoism. Meditation and body position in this ritual refer to *satori*, the experience of enlightenment in the Zen Buddhist tradition. Tea was brought from China by Buddhist monks. It was a trance inducing beverage regarded as a spiritual drink which in time became rather aesthetical and meditative than sacred.

In the *Sikhism*, a religion that appeared in Northern India during the medieval period, we find the *sacred meal*. The Sikh faith is a religion of reform, a syncretic religion, a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. To be more precisely, it means that the idea of reincarnation, karma and cosmic law, in other words *dharma* is taken from Hinduism and combined with the belief in Allah and in the prophets from the Islam.

This religion was founded by Guru Nanak. He established the system of the *langar* (communal kitchen) in order to form a close community. The term *langar* also refers to a dining hall where the sacred food is consumed. After the hymns of the sacred book *Adi Granth* are sung in a place of worship (*gurdwara*) and the requests are made to God, the adherents of Sikhism have a community meal. The *Prasad*, a mix of honey, rice flour and aromatic spices as a symbol of happiness creates the awareness of community strength and the cohesion in faith. At the *langar*, adherents of Sikhism are all equal regardless of their socioeconomic status and *varna* or the caste system is rejected. The Sikhs are like brothers to each other and they share both the communal meal and their feelings and the joy of being together. Probably the *langar* indicated a face to face meeting of the Sikhs as well as the fact that they were not isolated people, but a community that needed to be respected.

Based on this principle, the Sikh religion considered itself as a very demanding and often retaliative movement toward those who ruin the image of that religion. Violence was borrowed from the Islam, which they imitated. Harsh words were uttered by the adherents of Sikhism when this religion was believed to have been denigrated and discredited by the Indian state.

When Indira Gandhi's regime tried to take over Amritsar, the capital of the Sikh religion, drastic measures were adopted: the Prime Minister was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. Amritsar was a sacred place where non-Sikh devotees were prohibited from entering. The idea of local sacrilege (violation of a sacred place) must have originated in the Islamic thinking. For Muslims Mecca is such a holy city where people belonging to other religions than Islam are not allowed to enter. Community consciousness and langar (community meal) imply defending the sacredness of the Sikh religion. This is how the tradition of wearing a dagger (*kirpan*) by all initiated Sikhs. The concept of *miri-piri* (temporal authority and spiritual authority) can be interpreted as defending both the sacred and social area of the Sikh religion. And fighting for doctrine and sacredness implies force and violence.

We can conclude by saying that the *langar* meal does not have strict religious connotations, it also implies the consciousness of the community constantly defending against any challenges. The communal joy becomes an apologetic consciousness, i.e. in a conflict each is responsible for defending the community.

In Jewish thinking, there is a sacred food called *challah*, i.e. the *Shabbat meal*. Actually, there were three Shabbat meals: the Friday evening dinner, the Saturday noon lunch and the late afternoon Saturday meal. For the Saturday noon lunch, two braided loaves of bread were prepared and then placed on the table under an embroidered cover. This double loaf commemorates the *manna in the desert*. The embroidered cover may represent the Lord's glory that protected the Israelites when they wandered in the desert. The two loaves of bread reminded the Jews that the day before the Shabbat one needed two *omers of manna*, that is two units of measure in order to ensure the food for the entire family. In fact, *challah* is a kind of traditional *Paska*, made of flour, eggs, milk and sugar, with a sweet taste similar to that of the manna.

Cooking the two loaves of bread, the *challah*, required praying or invoking God when the Shabbat meal was prepared. The

Jewish woman would recite “Blessed are You, Lord” when preparing the *lechem mishneh*. The two loaves resemble Paska, the braided bread made of fine flour and they represent the food of the Israelites in the desert. In terms of taste, these challot are similar to the Easter bread but the blessing “Blessed are you, Lord, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth” makes this food be perceived no longer as a dessert but gives it a sacred meaning. Those tasting challah go back to the wilderness years, living in the times of Moses, imagining that period when food was always a gift from above, just like the manna would fall from heaven. Therefore man would have to give thanks to the Lord constantly. The forty-year wandering in the desert in search of the Holy Land is reflected in the Shabbat meal.

Challah is not only consumed during Shabbat, but also on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. On this occasion the challah may be rolled into a circular shape (sometimes referred to as a *Turban Challah*), symbolizing the cycle of the year. The ingredients are the same, but the mystic message is different: the idea of happiness. The year to come must be happy, just like *Turban Challah* is sweet and tasty.

Another type of challah is *Schlissel Challah*, an *Yiddish* term. In German „schlüssel“ means „key“. It is therefore called the „key Challah“ or *parnassa, livelihood*. This type of challah is baked on the first Shabbat after the end of the Jewish holiday of Passover and it bears a kabbalistic, mystical meaning. It is the beginning of a new cycle of one-year wandering till the next Pesach. On a mystical level, the Jew starts wandering through the desert again, in search of the Land of the Covenant and of the exit to Canaan. That is why challah is called „key“, because through this food one can find his path, the right direction or the clue leading to the Land of the Covenant. One patiently waits for all those key-moments that the Jewish people lived through in their search for the Zion. The kabbalistic meaning of the Schlissel Challah conveys the idea of the *food of the desert*, this braided bread representing the food of the Jewish worshipper he will

receive every day from now on. Therefore, it represents a spiritual meal that will nurture both the body and the soul on the way to the Land of the Covenant.

The presence of salt among the ingredients of this food symbolizes the idea of conservation. God conserves, preserves our lives, just like the salt preserves food. Therefore, salt has always played an indispensable role in Jewish life and it has been considered the best preservative. For this reason, in the Sermon of the Mount our Lord Jesus Christ spoke about the salt that should never spoil or decay (Matthew 5:13). This actually refers to the idea of *preserving providence*, through which God preserves and protects creation. That is why salt is called the *food of God* and through this salt He preserves our lives. Three important elements are found in the Jewish food: wine, bread and salt. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi interpreted them as such: the wine, the one that ferments is like the *wilderness* — everything is a battle, in turmoil; the bread is like the *settled land* — bread is created through cultivation and human intervention, underlining the idea of a settled society and finally the salt is like the *ocean—the sea*, where life begins. At the same time, salt is a purifying element. All these nutritive elements must be found on the Jew's table on the Shabbat or other feasts, when all three of them must be blessed together³.

Afikoman is another *sacred food*. The word is of Greek derivation, *epikomen* or *epikomion*, meaning *that which comes after* or *dessert*. This consecrated bread is also called *matzo* or *matza* is broken after the Passover meal. Probably it is a kind of cake in appearance and taste and it is also a device for keeping children awake and alert during the Seder proceedings, until the time it is needed for dessert, *afikoman*. The Jews keep watch for the Lord's Passover which was to free them from slavery to

³ Naftali Silderberg, *Why is the Challah dipped in Salt?*, in Chabad.org. Retriever 7\March 2013, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/484187/jewish/Kiddush-Challah.htm.

Pharaoh and take them to Canaan. Passover is a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites left Egypt in such haste they could only eat bitter herbs and matza, an *afikoman*, the last thing eaten on the way to the land of Canaan. The breaking in two of the matza refers to the kabbalistic symbol of “here” and “there”, “Egypt” and “the Holy Land”. And by its distribution to each guest, it symbolizes the Jewish communion when all the Jews become one people. The Jews share the bread both on their way to the Holy Land and on their historical way of all times and also on their way to God. Children keep watch the Easter night in wait for the *afikoman* and pay heed to the prayers and texts that are read.

The practice of eating this sacred food is no longer followed by all the Jews. Some people see it as belonging to the *haggadah* and not being connected to the Torah. It is more of a Talmudic process and not one directly related to the Torah, so it would be no more than a tradition. Therefore, the *afikoman* is celebrated only by some Jews unlike the Passover meal celebrated by all the Jews. After the *afikoman*, the Jew drinks the fourth cup of wine out of five, but the fifth cup (Elijah’s cup) is merely poured and then left. In the Jewish thinking there is a sacred food which refers to a sacred place. Communing with God is done by eating this food in order to commemorate important religious events in the history of the Jewish people.

Charoset or *haroset* is one of the *symbolic foods* eaten at the *Passover Seder*. It is a sweet, dark-colored paste made of fruits (figs, nuts, raisins, apples), mixed with honey and wine, symbolizing the Easter joy. All the Jewish communities believed that Passover is the time when the chosen people communes with God, when they are redeemed from slavery and rejoice in the Lord. This joy is also reflected in the food by attending the meal. Charoset, matza, wine glasses, afikamen etc., namely the food and the joy are put together, resulting in a sacred memory brought to life.

A different kind of nourishment, reckoned by the Judaic mysticism as adequate to the religious explanation, is salad or

vegetables sprinkled with water, salt and vinegar or oil, served at the Seder table; children are taught that such food symbolizes the coat of Joseph, splattered with lamb blood by his brothers when they sold him in Egypt. Every gesture or dish attempts to imprint the notion of sacred ground and sacred food, as a means of coming into communion with God.

The most important sacred meal in the Jewish tradition has always been the Passover Seder, celebrated on the 15th of Nissan, when the Jewish Passover is commemorated. This a reminder of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt, being a requirement imposed by Moses (Exodus 13). There are fourteen steps in the Seder. The first step of the Seder is *Kadesh*, in which the *Kiddush* is recited over wine and the first glass is sanctified. Now the Jew sits at the table and ritually washes his hands in a vessel (this step is called *Urchatz*). Salt is then poured into water and vegetables are dipped in it. This dipping symbolizes Joseph's tunic being dipped into blood by his brothers. The *matza*, the azyme is broken in half, just like the Jews used to break unleavened bread in the old days while getting outfitted ready for departure. The father of the house retells or relates the story of the Exodus from Egypt (*Maggid*), this being the moment when the entire biblical scene of those times is reexperienced. Moses' standing before Pharaoh, the plagues of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea etc.: all these are briefly presented as sacred reminders. The second glass of wine is drunk and then the Jew washes his hands as some sort of reminder of crossing the sea. The paschal lamb seasoned with bitter herbs, as required by the Book of Exodus, is then eaten, followed by the rest of the matza, *afikoman*, as a retrospect of the food for the road. In the end comes Hallel, the glorifying chant brought to God for this sacred meal. As the meal was concluded, the Jews wished for celebrating the following Pessah in Jerusalem, a constant yearning in this people's history, so closely tied to that location of fabulous heritage.

Each of the four glasses of wine carries a symbolic meaning, reminders of man's ascension towards God. The meal-opening glass is the blessing (*Kiddush*) over wine. This is a fourfold because God is thanked for food, land, Jerusalem and His divine grace. The second glass is that of the narration or meal sermon (*Maggid*), when the table companions receive reminder of the biblical message of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. The third glass is drunk after the azyme (*Birkat Hamazon*) is broken and the paschal lamb eaten. Now the classic Egypt time's landscape is set and the Jews are waiting for their departure towards their ancient dream. Finally, the last glass is drunk after the conclusion of the praising God hymn (*Hallel*), which refers to the concept of divine praising (hallelujah), of gratitude for all the gifts and especially for this unique time of year. There is also a feminist, matriarchal explanation, stating that the four glasses are reminders of the great four women of the patriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. However, given the preponderantly patriarchal nature of the Judaic society, there cannot be too much of an accent on this feminist approach.

The Passover Seder plate is a special plate (*ke'ara*) containing symbolic foods with religious significance. The traditional items are bitter herbs (*maror, chazeret*), a mixture of fruits (*charoset*), salad dipped in salt water (Joseph's tunic, *karpas*) and the roasted lamb (*zeroah*). The idea of sacred meal is rendered by the ritual washing of hands and the participants' clothing who wear *kittel* or a white robe as well as the *kippah* or *yarmulke*, the well-known Jewish cap.

Each food is served after saying a prayer and each family member has a certain behavior and wears certain clothes. And such things lead to the sacredness and sacralization of this moment. The Jewish custom is to observe the *kashrut* rules, according to which any food should be *kosher* or conform to the dietary laws of the Old Testament in order to be consumed. All

there requirements render the Jewish obsession for food sanctification⁴. However, the differences between Judaism and Christianity are great. The Eucharist cannot be compared to any sacred food in Judaism. In Christianity there are no stipulated hygienic rules for food; food is viewed from a different perspective. For Christians, bread and wine do not simply become sacred or sacrosanct gifts; they also change their ontology, becoming God Himself. Man consumes more than nutrients, entering another dimension: bonding and communion and with God, which leads to a perfect union between creation and its Creator. It is more than a commemoration or a chance to recall *illo tempore* events. It is about the perpetuation and the awareness of a present moment that has neither past nor future.

Islam, as part of the Semitic tradition, implies the idea of "lawful" (*halal*) and "unlawful" (*haram*), in all aspects, including food⁵. The term *haram*, which means *prohibited*, is applied to food because according to Semitic traditions, Muslims were prohibited from consuming any food. In the Islamic world the *sacred food* is viewed in the context of the above-mentioned terms. The Muslim must strictly observe the rule of these two categories (hallal and haram). According to the Quran 7: 157, meats are considered *haram*, such as pork, dog, donkey, most carnivorous animals (lion, bear, wolf etc) as well as other animals living in dirty places (reptiles, insects, mice, frogs etc). The rules of slaughter are based on Islamic law, *zabiha*. The animal must be slaughtered by cutting its throat in such a way that blood is effectively drained from it on the sand. The slaughter itself is preceded by the word *Bismillah* "in the name

⁴ Josy Eisenberg, *Judaism*, (Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1995), p. 28.

⁵ Ali Ünal, *Living in the Shade of Islam*, (Bucharest, Rao Publishing House, 2010).

of Allah⁶. Hunting animals for sport without eating them is prohibited. A hunted animal must be eaten because this is the purpose of the sacrifice. During hunting, before shooting the arrow or the gun *Bismillah* is also uttered. *Khamr* and any alcoholic drinks are considered *haram* and therefore totally forbidden in Islam. All drinks that intoxicate are unlawful to drink, being regarded as a temptation of the devil. The sacred food viewed as a relationship between Allah and his creation is not to be found in Islam. *Haram* and *halal* refer only to food consumption rules that do not imply a communal relationship with the Sacred.

The Islamic law also regulates clothing. Therefore, any part of the body that could attract the opposite sex should be covered. Sharia Law stipulates that the women's hair, body, legs (sometimes even the hands) and face should be covered. Men also cover their head, body and legs as a sign of respect and decency.

In Islam there are forty major sins (*al-Kaba'ir*⁷), which imply the concept of *haram*. We are now referring to the relationship

⁶ And do not eat of that upon which the name of Allah has not been mentioned, or indeed, it is grave disobedience; Quran 6: 121.

⁷ These sins include: disbelief (kufr), hypocrisy (nifaq), idolatry (shirk), neglecting any of the pillars of Islam, disobeying one's parents, committing murder, performing sorcery, committing adultery or fornication, committing sodomy, taking or paying interest, stealing, slandering chaste women, fleeing from the battle, gambling, devouring the wealth of orphans, being a perpetual liar, spreading harmful tales, spying on the Muslims and pointing out their secrets, abandoning relatives, wrongdoing, deception or oppression on the part of the ruler, committing injustice, committing oppression, being arrogant, boastful, vain, making false oath, consuming wealth acquired unlawfully, giving short weight or measure, committing suicide, giving and accepting bribes, showing-off, using religion or the „signs of Allah” for worldly gain, breaching trusts, eavesdropping on other's private conversation, not fulfilling one's promises, believing in what fortune-tellers and astrologers say, worshipping beings other than Allah, offending neighbors, offending and abusing Muslims, slaughtering an animal which has been dedicated to anyone other than Allah.

between man and Allah and the relationship among the followers of Islam. The relationship between man and society must constantly rely on trust and respect. Unfortunately, the Islamic haram has often been misinterpreted and had its meaning distorted in such a way that interpersonal relationship was limited to the relationship among the Muslim members, the people of other faiths being looked down upon. This treatment was reflected in the pressure the Christians had been kept under over the years.

In order to understand the true meaning of the sacred food, we need to go back to the Christian thinking. The differences in how this concept is viewed in other religions seem insurmountable. It is clear that each religion has its own way of interpreting the idea of sacred food. Yet, the Eucharist as sacred meal surpasses any of the significations it may have in other religions. Its meaning differs completely from what we have discussed so far. It is not about food, it is about a real presence and not just any presence, but the presence of God. God gives Himself to us as food, but the meaning of His act is completely different than that of any other religion.

Holy Trinity is present in the Eucharist. "All the three persons of the Trinity play an important part in this sacrament: The Father changes the Holy Gifts, but unless Christ Himself consents, they cannot become His Body and Blood only by the power of the Holy Spirit⁸". The real presence of the Triune God is revealed in the church. The knowledge of God ensures both the true and unique revelation knowledge and our living in Christ, because "Trinity provides us with the love of God⁹". The trinitarian presence makes one think everything from a tri-relational point of view, i.e. having a trinitary vision on spiritual and interpersonal relationship of man.

⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Holy Trinity or in the beginning there was love*, Pub. House of the Bible and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2012, p. 96.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

Eucharist is actually the *dynamics of the Church*. God works in the world through the Eucharistic and pneumatic presence of Christ, which is the prime mover of the Church. God's providence moves creation, preserves it and directs it to its goal on the strength of pneumatic reality. At the same time, the Christian Church is driven by the Eucharistic presence. The sacred food of the Christian Church is the ignition that provides the ship with dynamism in order to reach its telos. Thirdly, the Eucharist is the real connection between man and God in this earthly life. The Eucharist binds man to God and this bond is to become perfect in eternity. Through Eucharist humanity has the possibility of dialogic and ontic relationship with God. The human verb and the divine verb are to be found in the Eucharist. Without the Eucharist, the human verb remains empty speech or *quarrel about words* as the Apostle Paul puts it. Man acquires the word's meaning only after partaking of the Eucharist, after eating the sacred food. Only then does our word receive strength. That's why after the liturgy we are called to say loud to the world: *we have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true Faith...* This isn't just a liturgical response, but a call to the world, to the entire humankind. In other words, *we have seen the Lord*. If you want to see Him and to talk about Him, you must receive the Eucharist eat the real sacred food that makes you holy. Consume the true divine nourishment which sanctifies you. Unfortunately, we are confronted with a verbal inflation. Never before have so many words been spoken in the world. We hear a large excess of vowels and consonants. All this speaking is a cry that releases a quantum. Each word we pronounce creates a subliminal vibration. This vibration may be either positive or negative, just like any energy quantum. It can induce the feeling similar to a blessing or a curse. It all depends on the positive or negative influence, the positive or negative connotation that our words carry. That is why people feel blessed or cursed sometimes. They feel that way not because God blesses the world, but mostly because of the holy words spoken in the

world. This is the prayer quantum. It is said that God does not end the world because people still pray. To be more specific, it means that there are positive energy waves reverberating in the world.

Yet, there are a lot of negative quanta. They appear to be much more than the positive ones. And these quanta reside in empty words, insults, offensive language and in those words in which God is not present. Language creates a negative energy generating tension in society and in our souls. When the words are spoken against God, negative energy quanta are created causing arguments and wars, large scale atrocities. The Eucharist is the one that sanctifies the human logos. When receiving the Eucharist, the *sacred food* or the *Christian meal*, the word in the man's mouth is becomes sacrosanct and creates positive waves.

Fourthly, the Eucharist, the sacred Christian food, binds the present with the eternity, it binds history with the eschaton and it binds *already* with *not yet*. From this point of view, humankind lives according to the consideration of St. Simeon the New Theologian, who asserts that those who do not reach heaven from here, will not reach it in the future life. That means the eschaton relates to present time, when people reach either heaven or hell, they perceive the positive or the negative presence. If they feel the positive presence, they are on the right way, but if they feel the negative one, they still have time to change that.

The best place where the *sacred food* gives you that feeling is the Church, more precisely the Divine Liturgy. It is here that man feels God in His eschatological glory. To humankind, Christ isn't a mere mortal man, but the God of kenosis and also the God of glory. Kenosis and doxology are present in the Eucharist¹⁰.

¹⁰ See Fra. Tadros Y. Malaty, *Christ in the Eucharist*, Third Edition, Orange-California, 2001.

Suffering and worship become one in the person of the sacrificed God-man. When consuming the Eucharist we enter the eschatological present, the *schon und noch nicht*¹¹, which become one. For that reason Father Dumitru Stăniloae talks about the feeling of *the eight day* in the Church, in the Holy Mysteries. Especially through the Eucharist man becomes eschatological and the day of eternity, the eighth day becomes his every day.

Finally, the Eucharist is the recovery of creation. *Not only the eschatological presence of God, but the new heaven and the new earth in the concrete existence.* Consciously and worthily partaking of the Eucharist makes man feel the world has become sacred again, *a new heaven and a new earth* (Revelation 21, 1). He who receives the Eucharist aware of this act, perceives the world different than before the communion. The world has a different aura. It awaits the eternity, the complete sacredness. Through Eucharist *human eyes become Taboric* and everything is seen through the light of Christ, so that the eyes appear to be blind, as those of the apostles on Tabor. On the contrary, without the Eucharist there are no *Christic eyes*, there is no taboric condition. Everything is seen through the *material blindness* and world is quantified only by material values, which we all know are decaying and destructible.

We can conclude by saying that from the Christian point of view, the Holy Eucharist does not fall in the Islamic *haram/halal*, *lawful/unlawful* category and it does not belong to the Jewish kosher, either. Nor is it limited to the hallucinatory *haoma/soma* of the Eastern religions. The Eucharist is not *trance inducing* or a *religious vertigo* provider. It is a *face to face meeting*, it means the real presence of God in the existential concreteness. It is also a *metanoia* that changes everything. Time becomes eternity and there is only *present continuous*.

¹¹ George Florovsky, *Le Corps du Christ vivant*, in: La Sainte Eglise Universelle, Neuchâtel, 1948, p. 15: "The King has come and His Kingdom is to come".

Humanity is sanctified by the presence of the Eucharistic God, receiving the anastastic and eschatological dimensions. The cosmos becomes Taboric, a *photon-divine* presence.

We sincerely ask the question: is there a more profound food than the real *sacred Christian food, the Holy Eucharist?*

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