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East of Eden

Sin and Redemption at the Whole Foods Market

Genesis: in which the world, the concept of sin, and cooperative gardening are created

Produce, decorated with hanging vines and hand-lettered “Organic” signs, greets customers as they enter any Whole Foods supermarket. The produce aisle has the look of a garden utopia, a prototype for the markets where we will shop after we have abolished hunger, where everyone will eat from the same cornucopia: fruits from environmentally friendly markets, available everywhere, year-round. Fewer organic signs decorate my own department, the cheese counter, which lies just past the produce stands and before the frigid Arctic of the ice cream freezer. Even my pure, raw-milk cheeses seem processed in comparison to the vegetables and fruits. We are the raw and the cooked, and my domain is the latter. It includes truffle oil, rich chocolates, specialty crackers, and, of course, cheese. In a purely symbolic sense, I am a little east of Eden.

The imagery is appropriate, for there is something essentially religious about working at a Whole Foods market. Standing behind the cheese counter, cutting wedges of Fourme D’Ambert, thick rounds of domestic Provolone, or slabs of imported blue Gouda, I read countless labels extolling the purity of the milk and the value of the traditional cheese-making process. In produce, similar signs advertise the vitamin content and organic nature of the carrots, kale, and celery. There are photographs of the farmers with their crops, drawing close the connection between the producers’ personalities and the food they produce. The Whole Foods company, other signs tell us, works only with farms that treat their employees well. Whole Foods is anti-exploitation; our suppliers are without sin, and by the transitive property of moral mathematics, so are our customers. My counter is roughly at the center of our shop floor. I can look in the cardinal directions around me and imagine the stations of the cross: John of the Seafood, Mark of the Bakery, Peter of the Dairy, earthy Matthew of Produce. I imagine the public address system blaring, “Saint Peter to your aisle for customer assistance.” John the Baptist presumably works at the font

of the water of life, the espresso bar (which, naturally, features fair-traded coffee from Chile, Ethiopia, and Java).

Many of our customers want a bit of this freedom from sin themselves—that’s why they choose to shop with us rather than at a conventional supermarket. They have political reasons, as well: Whole Foods and its local subsidiary, Bread and Circus, are the descendants of the hippie organic cooperatives of the 1960s and ’70s, when the link between food consump-

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tion and activism was apparent. Grape workers mistreated? Boycott the product. Markets in my hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts, hung photographs of Cesar Chavez, the leader—and perhaps the saint—of the United Farm Workers. During the late 1990s the strawberry boycotts of his activist heirs revived the theme that choosing what one buys (or does not buy) is a political act. Some of my customers are as motivated by politics as the store once was, and they are eager to tell us when we fall from grace. One customer gave me a guided tour of the chocolates on my own counter, explaining which ones were produced by slave labor in Côte d’Ivoire.

The idea of morality is not simply connected to the activist history of the Whole Foods chain, however. I also

locate it in the desire to withdraw from the world of agribusiness, which mistreats workers, endangers species, and does little to replace what it uses. Consumers are willing to pay a little more for their products, not just because they want the highest quality, but because they want assurance that they are doing no wrong. Absolution. In a sense, it is our notion of what it means to do good that has changed: rather than taking more direct political action, one can retreat to a safe marketplace and see oneself as virtuous. Indonesian filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik sees the giant commercial markets of Paris as exemplifying the virtues of the modern West: “*Liberté, Egalité, Supermarché.*” If you perceive your shopping habits as complicit with the social irresponsibility of late capitalism (and don’t we all have days like this?), isn’t it better to retreat to a nice organic market?

So you can consume products from every country in the world, and without harming any person or microclimate. But in the Whole Foods mindset we also find the idea that our consumption can have an impact on the rest of the world, and that the activist impulse has not yet been subsumed within a marketing campaign. Politics have not been rendered toothless through transformation into an aesthetic. And there is something compelling about this aspect of Whole Foods. The United States, the world’s greatest consumer, has a significant effect on the countries that produce our goods: my coffee habit, when combined with my neighbors’ coffee habits, bears upon all the plantation workers growing the stuff. And the idea that I should do no harm, as I drink my coffee, is as satisfying as the coffee itself.

Exodus: looking for a way to escape sin

However commendable Whole Foods’ desire to consume without harm—to tread lightly on the earth—may be, there is something hidden there that irritates. We want to be exempted from responsibility for the crimes of our first-world communities. However, we can take this desire too far and begin to ignore those crimes altogether. What began in activism, in the farmers’ markets of the sixties and seventies, can become self-satisfaction or an option available only to the wealthy. A large conventional supermarket located next to a Boston housing project was bought out and replaced with a Whole Foods market. Where can the project’s residents buy their groceries now? Isn’t there something about such gentrification that is inconsistent with the company’s agenda?

Having observed the Whole Foods chain as both a shopper and an employee, I am beginning to notice the fragility (“power of your intense fragility,” ee cummings wrote) of its moral project. Or perhaps it’s just the sheer potential for

silliness. Making moral claims at a supermarket? The farmers don’t harm the cows with bovine growth hormones; our suppliers are in fair-trade relationships with the farmers; the Whole Foods staff is better treated than their counterparts at conventional supermarkets. And if customers pay a little more than they would across the street, this expenditure is nothing in exchange for the assurance of virtue, the knowledge that they have escaped sin. But this association between consumption and morality is ridiculous: it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the consumer of bovine growth hormones to enter the kingdom of heaven. And the irony is, as in the housing-project story, that when we make food the sole focus of moral concern, we can easily forget other issues.

Exodus II: learning to eat from the right tree

Talking of sin would be too glib, except that religion influences everything in our culture, and so we have come to think of moral culpability also in terms of sin. The book of Genesis becomes the framework for the way we read wrongdoing, and the symbolism is appropriate in this case. Eat the wrong apple, says God, and your downfall is assured. Whole Foods sneakily implies the same thing, and those as easily influenced as myself understand this immediately. But eating the wrong apple was originally tied not only to mortality and sin, but also to knowledge. Sinning, I think, always carries the faintest tinge of positive association, for it implies that one has gone out into the world to get something and has *succeeded*. Whole Foods actually transforms the idea of sin by giving us a way to avoid it. This means of escape, this special knowledge, is simply learning how to eat correctly. There’s the rub, the comic turn: Whole Foods releases us from sin by returning us to the Garden. We no longer eat from the Tree of Knowledge, but from the trees of fair-trading organic farms.

Leviticus: or the way to make any foodstuff whole

The place where I work while I make these silent observations is the Cheese Department. The difficulty with integrating cheese into the Whole Foods project is that cheese is essentially a mixture of animal milk and animal parts. In addition to rennet—the enzymatic agent that contributes to the coagulation of milk—there are bacteria, so cheese is potentially abhorrent to both vegetarians and the health-conscious. Nothing about cheese is inherently industrial (all those processed American Cheddars and the Swiss cheeses made in factories outside Brussels aside), but it takes gymnastic maneuvers to market certain cheeses to Whole Foods cus-

tomers. To gain their approval, the cheese must be made into low-fat, soy, or other variants. Raw-milk cheese is almost too whole a food for Whole Foods. However, some cheeses are ideal for the Whole Foods marketing campaign. If they are produced in small batches in local dairies, the mom-and-pop scale of production makes it easy for us to keep up-to-date on cheese-making practices. Many manufacturers, aware of the increasing consumer interest in such small-batch cheeses, now provide information on their company's origins, connections to milk producers, and fidelity to old-world cheese-making techniques.

The cheese department illustrates another detail of the Whole Foods marketing strategy. Certain cheeses "on the grid" of corporate production have been made acceptable through their use of soy products or skim milk, so that they are no longer identified as processed American and are therefore acceptable to the Whole Foods shopper. Then there are "off the grid" products, as unconventional as can be, those small-farm cheeses that let consumers escape corporate consumption and eat something more idiosyncratic. Any cheese is easier to market if it has been made in a wooden shack from milk produced by a half dozen specific cows whose names are listed on the cheesecloth wrapper: "Bessie's Camembert, 2002." The more personalized, the further off the grid.

Numbers: activism, religion, and shopping are all the same

A religious experience is lurking somewhere in the aisles of Whole Foods. Corporate rhetoric helps, of course, but a moral atmosphere surrounds socially conscious shopping, as does a vocabulary of religious images that we use to describe and negotiate morality. The activist, organic co-ops used rhetoric that told us how our behavior as consumers in an industrial society cut us off—exiled us—from an Eden of blameless good eating. We suddenly realized that we had migrant workers to worry about. But the current Whole Foods promise is quite different: the industrial consumer can still have access to Eden. This story of return should sound familiar, because it has its precedent in the Bible. Eden was never destroyed; God merely set a guard there, in case we returned. Whole Foods has found a secret path around that angel with the flaming sword, a map indicating which trees in the garden produce the sweetest fruit.

Yet the relief from sin presents problems of its own. After all, we are so used to living with the notion of sin, who could function without it? Indeed, the idea of becoming sinless runs against the activist portion of the Whole Foods mission,

which urges us to become involved in improving the lives of the farmers and plantation workers who produce our food. In this model one does not only rise above sin but, having risen, returns to the world to combat that sin. To consume is to remain aware of the sinful potential of one's act, to remain aware of the importance of vigilance against buying the wrong product. One has to be willing to enter into the moral drama. Now that the sixties and seventies are past, the atmosphere around supermarket shopping makes it hard to portray food consumption as political behavior with the same fervor that we once could. Instead, by shopping at a Whole Foods market, the customer becomes part of a culinary and moral elite, buying while treading lightly.

Deuteronomy: the shape of things to come

Activism and escapism are both at work within the Whole Foods chain, with a constant balancing act in progress. At the moment, the more conservative strain (escapism is, in a sense, always conservative in character) predominates. Although the activist impulse is still alive, and felt in many small ways as you walk the aisles, the sense of relief from consumer sin is far more prevalent. The tension between involvement and the desire for escape is certainly not unique to businesses like this one; it is a dynamic familiar to many American liberals, who want both to reform the political world and to live above its moral compromises.

Like any large company, of course, Whole Foods must obey market forces. It has a consumer base that wants high-quality organic food; however, few consumers view their shopping as activism, or see their consumption as "off the grid" of agribusiness. Rather, they want to be "off the grid" of mainstream supermarket products: the sin that shoppers are most often released from is not the sin of buying Chilean grapes or cocoa from Côte D'Ivoire slave plantations, but the sin of culinary bad taste. In the utopia that shoppers imagine exists at Whole Foods, everything is organic, painlessly grown, picked, and slaughtered. The store recalls nothing so much as the mythical land of Cockaigne where animals leap willingly into frying pans, and laborers have no need to stoop for strawberries or reach for grapes.

The question I ask myself is, simply, whether the pleasures of a return to Eden will make me forget the sin just over the walls. ☉