

REVIEW

David M. Freidenreich

*Foreigners and their Food:
Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011),
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One paradox apparent in the comparative study of religions is that often religions are most similar in the means they use to distinguish themselves from each other. In this impressive, wide-ranging, careful study of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic food restrictions in the second to twelfth centuries, Freidenreich shows convincingly that legal scholars in all three religions used restrictions about food prepared by people of other religions in order to more firmly establish boundaries between them.

Freidenreich traces the complicated interactions of two forms of food prohibitions: ingredient-based prohibitions, in which food is prohibited because of the ingredients they contain (e.g., pork, shellfish, mixtures of meat and dairy), and commensality restrictions, in which food is prohibited because of something about the person who prepared it or in other ways came into contact with it. In basic terms, ingredient-based prohibitions are about restricting consumption of a certain kind of food, and commensality prohibitions are about restricting contact with a certain kind of person. But Freidenreich shows the slipperiness of these two categories, as they sometimes meld into one another. A commensality-based restriction can reflect fear that people of another religion might introduce prohibited ingredients that they customarily use. An ingredient-based restriction can in practice be used to restrict commensality.

Freidenreich illustrates this slipperiness through his history of Jewish food restrictions, which began as primarily ingredient-based. The laws of Leviticus, for example, distinguish permitted animals from non-permitted animals, just as God has distinguished Israel from all other nations. However, these restrictions but do not require Israelites to abstain from food prepared by non-Israelites. A distinction began to appear in the Hellenistic period. Some writers, such as Philo and other Alexandrians, continued to view Jewish food restrictions as ingredient-based and a purely symbolic representation of Jewish difference. By contrast, Judean writers like the authors of *Second Maccabees* and other apocryphal works understood food prepared by non-Jews as prohibited. Later, in the rabbinic codification of Jewish law in the Mishnah and Tosefta, some food preparation activities were restricted to Jews, such as the slaughter of animals, while other kinds were not, such as the pressing of olive oil. In many cases, rabbis rationalized forbidding food prepared by foreigners because they might introduce prohibited ingredients. For example, rabbis forbade cheese made by gentiles because it might be made using animal rennet, even though it is not clear why animal rennet should be forbidden in all cases.

Christian food restrictions, as Freidenreich shows, developed as a way for Christians to distinguish themselves from both Jews and Pagans. Their food restrictions were primarily based on commensality, as can be seen in Paul's writings. Unlike Pagans, they were forbidden to eat food

offered to idols or to eat together with idolaters or immoral persons (1 Corinthians 5:11). By contrast, and unlike Jews, they did not adhere to a specific list of prohibited ingredients (Romans 14:14-15, 20-21). In the fourth century these commensality restrictions expanded to include any food made by Jews for ritual use. The sixth-century bishop Caesarius of Arles extended these rules to prohibit consumption of any food made by Jews at all. In a fascinating late medieval dispute, Christians debated whether or not it was permitted to eat the hindquarters of an animal that had been slaughtered by a Jew according to kosher law. (Jews did not eat this part of the animal, instead selling it to non-Jews.) Some Christian authorities prohibited it, considering it “Jewish food” and hence unacceptable (p. 121). Others permitted it, viewing refusal to eat food that Jews refused to eat as implicit acceptance of Jewish food restrictions and paradoxically even Judaizing.

Islamic ingredient-based food restrictions steered a middle way between Jewish and Christian approaches. Muslims prohibited the consumption of pork while permitting the consumption of other animals prohibited in Leviticus since these latter prohibitions were, according to the Qur’an, intended only for Jews. Islamic commensality-based food restrictions, on the other hand, drew a distinction between Jews and Christians, who were “less foreign” foreigners, and Pagans, who were more foreign (p. 8). Sunni law permitted meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians, while prohibiting meat slaughtered by Pagans. Shi’i authorities prohibited meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians, in part to make a distinction between themselves and Sunnis who ate meat slaughtered by foreigners. Freidenreich shows that some Islamic food restrictions were not only intended to distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims, but even to distinguish between different types of foreigners, such as Pagans, other monotheists, and other Muslims.

As Freidenreich shows, restrictions intended to separate one’s own group from another did not always involve deep, or for that matter any, understanding of the other group’s religious traditions. For example, rabbis in the Talmud prohibited wine touched by gentiles on the grounds that they might have offered it to idols, though they knew little about the use of wine in the rituals of the gentiles with whom they were in contact. Islamic thinkers had lengthy legal discussions about food prepared by Sabians, a group mentioned in the Qur’an, though both modern scholars and even medieval Muslims seem entirely unclear about who they were (p. 153).

Freidenreich’s writing is clear, and he demonstrates similarities in the ways in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims use food restrictions to separate themselves from each other. Since he is writing about multiple traditions, he clearly explains technical terms from each tradition for people who might not be familiar with them. His analysis of complicated legal passages from the Talmud, the Hadith, and Patristic literature are all remarkably accessible even for someone with no previous experience with these texts.