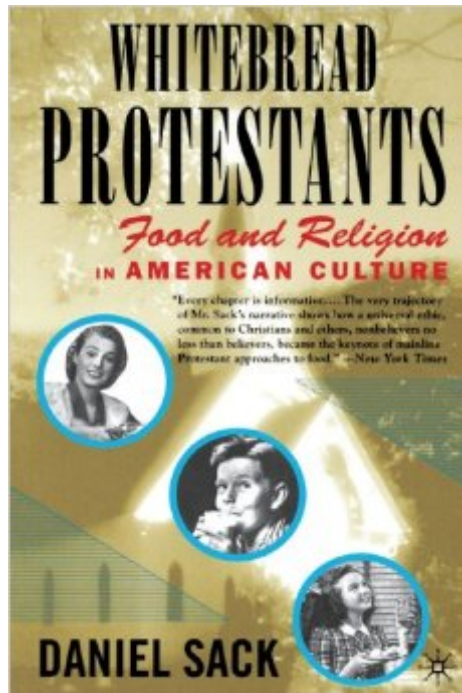


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Whitebread Protestants: Food And Religion In American Culture



Synopsis

At the beginning of *Whitebread Protestants*, Daniel Sack writes "When I was young, church meant food. Decades later, it's hard to point to particular events, but there are lots of tastes, smells, and memories such as the taste of dry cookies and punch from coffee hour - or that strange orange drink from vacation Bible school." And so he begins this fascinating look at the role food has played in the daily life of the white Protestant community in the United States. He looks at coffee hours, potluck dinners, ladies' afternoon teas, soup kitchens, communion elements, and a variety of other things. A blend of popular culture, religious history and the growing field of food studies, the book will reveal both conflict and vitality in unexpected places in American religious life.

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Customer Reviews

That bread and wine are at the center of most Christian religious services is not news. But taking that seriously -- the centrality of food in worship, in the communal experience of faith -- gives Sack's book a window into the what we want from our churches and how our churches are drawn into the rest of our lives. Five chapters, each in a somewhat different voice, look at the way food functions in mainline Protestant churches. It reaches back into the 1800's, at the fierce battles by those who argued that Jesus must have been a temperance crusader who never would let alcohol cross His lips. It moves through the details of Atlanta's current church-based efforts to feed the hungry, and the tension between working to feed the hungry and working to end hunger. It stops by the suburbs of Chicago, to churches where professional cafeterias have replaced potluck dinners. Along the

way, you get great anecdotes, solid writing, and a lot to think about. The simple strength of the narrative alone makes the book worth buying. But the insights you pick up along the way are what will fuel your dinner conversations for some time afterwards.

I gave Sacks' books less than 5 stars because it was a tedious read and the range of topics while related seemed too disparate with each deserving much more treatment than was afforded in this book. To Sacks credit, he noted: "The five chapters of this book are, to a certain degree, independent. Each one focuses on a different topic, a different function of food in church life" (p. 5). This was his design strategy but I think the effect on the reader was not favorable. I focused my attention on two chapters (Ch1 Liturgical Food and Ch2 Social Food: Potlucks and Coffee Hours) and found myself partially reading the remaining chapters. Ch1 Liturgical Food - Very thought provoking introduction of the 'politics' of the community table, sacraments, and the 'presentation' of communion within religious life. Sacks noted, "the Communion table has long been a place of conflict" (p. 10). The discussion on the role of hermeneutics as intersected with the temperance movement historically within the US was quite fascinating. As Gadamer noted, our interpretation is always historically situated.....I found myself reflecting as I considered Sacks' ideas how much of our "this is what the Scripture says" is influenced by our history of "this is the way this is done"...just saying (big grin)!. Ch2 Social Food: Potlucks and Coffee Hours - I bought the book for this section because I have an interest in the role of food in gender role negotiation and community building. Sacks noted: "The meals are a place where religious identity is shaped, community is built, and memories are created" (p. 62). Sacks ponders the shifts in family makeups, increase in working women, less time for volunteering and less desire to participate in potlucks. Sacks questioned the shift from volunteers in food production to the rise within some churches to outsourced cafeterias and coffee shops. How/Where are gender roles learned and negotiated in the absence of the informal context? How is the community building changed with a formal food production versus an informal volunteer organization and commitment? A very thought provoking chapter and worth the book purchase if these are topics of inquiry!

The title of this book led me to think it would be about religion and consumption, and would have some connection to the growing literature on food and society, food history, and the origins of American food traditions. Instead the book is very narrow - it deals mainly with the tradition of Protestant potluck suppers, and reaches the not-very-surprising conclusion that they were important in building social networks and holding congregations together. And that's pretty much it. You have

to provide the analysis and wider context yourself.

Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture What do Welch's Grape Juice and Graham Crackers have in common? They are both products that arose out attempts by committed Christians to bring their faith to bear on the food they ate. These are just two of many interesting tidbits that populate the book Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture. Written ten years ago by Daniel Sack as his doctoral dissertation. Whitebread Protestants, looks at the role of food, a very material substance in the lives of people, who focus on the immaterial in their worship and theology (or so they claim). Along the way Sack demonstrates this by looking at how theological and liturgical decisions were often buttressed by the use of medical information. This was the case with the Graham cracker. Sylvester Graham was a clergyman who believed in the use of whole wheat never refined flour, which created his lasting legacy the Graham cracker. On the other side of the coin was Welch's grape juice. The temperance movement had a great effect on the churches of the late 19th and early 20th century. Wine at communion was considered wrong, Charles Welch created a non-alcoholic alternative. His son Charles turned it into a multi-million dollar business. These are just two of the examples of where theological understanding mingled with American culture and know how. They also demonstrate the constant struggle between the church and culture. These struggles are demonstrated over and over again throughout Whitebread Protestants. Sack tracks these tensions, through discussions of potlucks and coffee hours, emergency food, food justice and finally through the nutritional revolution. If one thing emerges clearly out of the book, it is that when the church and food culture have clashed the food culture has come out on top more often than not. This should give pause to anyone who puts forward their approach to food and eating as the best or even only approach to "Christian" eating. The book should in fact make us reevaluate everything we do as Christians in the area of food, because clear after reading the book, when it comes to feeding the world we have been abject failures. Although it's ten years old, Whitebread Protestants is definitely a book that every Christian interested in food and feeding the world should read.

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