"Saying Grace: Praying Over the Loss of African-American Religious and Food Culture (and how they are related)"
Mary Hinton
Misericordia University

Introduction
God is great, God is good;
and we thank Him for our food.
By His hand we all are fed.
Thank you for our daily bread.
Amen.

At many meals a prayer similar in style and substance to the above is uttered. We offer thanks to God for our sustenance and then share a meal. For many years in the black community that meal consisted of soul food - food that was lovingly prepared and designed to nourish our emotional, social and spiritual selves. Whether we found ourselves on the farm or in thh city, enslaved or free, our food culture bound us to one another. Our religious culture, in a hush harbor or an urban church, reflected our gratitude to God for keeping us and nurturing our community. Today, however, many of us are silent as we prepare to eat food designed to support our bodies, not our souls.

This paper investigates the joint losses of food and religious culture in the African-American community. I propose that this dual loss has had a palpable impact on the African-American community and that only by re-appropriating the symbols and meanings of these two key cultural components will the African-American community regain a significant portion of its rich history and traditions. The paper will begin with a historical perspective on the role of food in both a religious and cultural context. I will then offer an analysis of why the dual losses have occurred, identify the consequences of the losses and suggest strategies for redressing the problem.

Brief Historical Analysis of Food and Religion
Food and eating are consistent sources of imagery throughout the Bible beginning in Genesis and running throughout the text[1]. Food is used as a tool for healing, an instrument in miracles, and as a symbol of the body of Christ, each instance highlighting the centrality of food to our religious and spiritual lives. These biblical references call our attention to the importance of our intake of the holy and uses one of the most basic human functions – eating – to reflect that our religion figuratively and literally nourishes us.

Eating is one of our most basic and important human functions. Given that "one of the earliest forms of security and of sensory pleasure is connected with the intake of food and that about it are centered the first human relations" (Powdermaker 1997, 208), food has always provided more than mere nutrition. It provides early bonding with parental figures and numerous opportunities to gather with friends and family to share life's joys and woes. In many ways, our food rituals are borne from and reflect our religious rituals as in the tightly proscribed Passover seder or the traditional Easter lamb. Without question, food is integral to religion. Similarly, religion was once an integral component of the black community.

---

[1] Among the numerous biblical references to food are: Genesis 1:29; Exodus 12:1–13, 12:16; Genesis 22:1–19;Exodus 16:31–35; Leviticus 20: 24-25; Mark 7:19; Mark 14:17–25; Matthew 15:11; Matthew 26:20–29; Luke 22:14–23; John 13:1–14, 13:31; John 2:1–12.

Historical Role of Religion in the Black Community

The black church, even when it was an invisible institution, was a source of support and encouragement for blacks in a terrible time and place, and church membership defined the community. Religious education consisted of blacks educating self and others about their humanity, history and future. For much of the history of black people, religious identity was personal identity.

Though the black church may vary in doctrine and mission, substance and style, nearly every African-American, and most other Americans, will certainly conjure up an image of what 'black church' means. Whether interpreted as a social movement, religious center, community pillar, or moral authority, the 'black church' has, at times, meant each – and all – of these things to its members and onlookers.

The black church was born out of the desire of Africans to experience the full spectrum of their humanity despite the horrors they were subjected to in this new land. Though the black church has remained stable across time, it is not a monolith. For some, the black church represents an organizational construct that protects and nourishes the souls of black folks in a society that has been hostile historically. For others, the black church represents a powerful force in building and sustaining communities, especially with regard to providing a moral perspective from which to tackle communal problems. And, of course, many view the black church as a place to find and interpret the word of God. The black church, from its inception and in its many forms, was the foundation of the black community.

The Intersection of Food and Religion in the African-American Community

Since religious life was black life and food is a central part of religion, food played a central role in the black community. The role of food in religion has been widely studied ranging from Sack's *Whitebread Protestants* (2000) perspective to analyzing the elaborate food rituals of early Christianity (Feeley-Harnik 1994). Many non-Christian religions offer prescriptions that set apart and forbid certain foods, labeling them as unacceptable. Though Christianity does not entail numerous dietary prohibitions - an explicit rejection of the extensive dietary laws of Judaism as explained in Matthew (Harris, Lyon, and McLaughlin 2005, 86) - several traditions offer some dietary requirements, such as Catholicism's adherence to dietary regulations during religious seasons. Regardless of whether the food is forbidden or encouraged, it has been widely suggested (and accepted) that the circumstances, practices and traditions surrounding food is what holds the meaning for religious food rituals. Sack (2000) suggests that, "while the actual food is important, it is eating that gives food meaning." Many ascribe to the idea that it is the circumstance, not the substance, which holds all of the meaning for food.

It is in this area that food in the black religious tradition varies from that of other groups. "The essence of black culture has been handed down through oral history, generation after generation in the African tradition, through the selection and preparation of soul food" (Hughes 1997, 272). In the black community, unlike many others, the food *itself* carried as much meaning as the rituals and circumstance ascribed to the food.

Soler writes: "Cooking is a language through which a society expresses itself. For man knows that the food he ingests in order to live will become assimilated into his being, will become himself. There must be, therefore, a relationship between the idea he has formed of specific items of food and the image he has of himself and his place in the universe. There is a link between a people's dietary habits and its perception of the world" (Soler 1997, 55). The

food that blacks were "given" by the master were the lowest food forms: the cast-offs and unwanted entrails and appendages mirroring blacks' lowly status. Yet, the creativity, passion and love which were used to transform those meager offerings into a cuisine reflect the creativity, passion and love that African-Americans carried within themselves. Blacks did not become what they ate; they transformed what they ate into something better. It was the black family's ability to turn this food into "more" that gives the foodstuff *itself* meaning. Blacks were given the leftovers and were treated as leftovers. That these unwanted foods could be transformed with our own hands, our own ideas and our own cooking skills makes the food important to black culture. The food carried meaning, in and of itself.

Of equal importance is how foods were brought from Africa to the United States. In the early days of slavery, food provided a necessary link to a lost country and lost humanity. Yams, peanuts, okra, rice and watermelons are but a few of the foods that were brought directly over from Africa to the United States and Caribbean. Transported as seeds, these foods carried great meaning. "Accessibility to the roots of plants is preserved by possession of seeds. Forced to leave their native land, their home, family, and African tribes, many slaves brought seeds with them" (Hughes 1997, 272). This strategy maintained ethnic identity and food became an encyclopedia of black history and culture. Once again, in black culture the food had great meaning beyond its uses.

This is not to say that the circumstances of food and eating were unimportant in the black community. Food traditions and practices were many, varied and important. Food provided an opportunity to gather as a people. It represented freedom to explore and nourish one's own spirit and to celebrate the relationship between family and community away from the watchful eye and oversight of the master. Food became a central element in religious ceremonies, allowing the enslaved to celebrate not only their God, but their humanity and community (Perdue, Barton and Phillips 1976). Food rituals offered a prophetic voice of hope and energy in the midst of empiricism, and these elaborate meals became a hallmark of the black community, taking on the name "soul food" which embraces the spiritual importance of the communal table and of eating. Powerful religious education took place during these food rituals, not just regarding the Christian story, but by placing the Christian story in conversation with African-American communal history. This story was shared and handed down during these food gatherings.

Food remained of great importance well into the 20th century when blacks were not allowed to eat in venues outside of their homes due to segregation laws and lack of access to restaurants (Hughes 1997). The sharing of food became a survival mechanism as blacks participated in the great migration and needed to find respite in new surroundings. Food also became a signature of one's origins. Though blacks left rural communities and relocated to the urban north, a carefully prepared pulled pork barbecue dinner became a reminder of their North Carolina home. Jambalaya recalled hot days on the Louisiana bayou and the ever-present white rice made Charleston seem close by.

Food and the attendant rituals taught blacks about self and community in relation to the divine. The meal became a source of religious education. The power and importance of food to religious practice, while important in most traditions, was exponentially magnified in the black community.

Loss of Religious Culture

In the late 20th century, as the civil rights movement met with some success and African-Americans became economically and socially diverse, religious culture in the black community began to shift. How was the church to reconcile itself with a vastly different culture in the U.S.

than the one in which it was born? How was it to reflect the rich spiritual heritage of its origins in the face of new social and economic realities – both positive and negative - within the black community?

While it would be an overstatement to suggest that the black church had fallen into a state of desuetude, it is clear that the late 20th century saw a significant shift in the black church. For the first time since its inception there was a decrease in the involvement of young people in the church, and by the 1990's a generation of unchurched black youth began to emerge (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).   Further, as middle-class black churches began to imitate the worship practices of white churches, a religious schism between middle and lower income blacks grew. Though membership roles did not decline precipitously, the black church became fractured. Lutz states, "For the majority, leaving the nest in the 1970s also meant leaving the familiar churches and the traditions and neighborhoods they knew as children. The upward mobility, however, turned out to be a somewhat lonely journey. Not all middle- and upper-class African Americans have experienced the joy and fulfillment they thought should have accompanied their economic achievements. What was missing? For some, it turned out to be the warmth and security of their homey black churches" (Lutz 2001, 97). No longer was the black church the center of identity for African-Americans. As mega churches emerged and personal spirituality began to supercede religious culture, communal and symbolic elements in the black church diminished.

Most importantly, religious education that placed the black experience in conversation with the Christian story began to disappear. People no longer wanted to hear about the unending struggle and the metaphor of blacks as the new Israelites. Rather, solace was taken in attending churches that spoke to the "arrival" of blacks. Instead of educating towards freedom and liberation the black church, in many areas, began to educate towards privatized religion and prosperity.

The most troubling religious loss was that of the prophetic voice of the black church. The black church had, since it's inception in the 17th century, stood as beacon against injustice and used its power of proclamation to visibly and audibly rail against the status quo. This voice carried the black church and black people through nearly three hundred years of tortured existence, offering hope where there otherwise was none. This prophetic voice moved a nation during the civil rights movement and was constantly heard from the black church.

Yet, the prophetic voice began to be silenced in the late 20th century. As a new gospel geared towards comfort statements and personal prosperity emerged, the prophetic voice began disappearing and the cost was great. As a community, African-Americans were beginning to reap some economic and social fruits of centuries of struggle, yet this assimilation included the adoption of majority values of independence and privatization. As a community, it became easier for African-Americans to ignore those who have little and to focus on those who have much.

Loss Of Food Culture

Given the relationship between food culture and religious culture, it is not surprising that, concomitant with the loss of religious culture, African-American food culture in the United States shifted in the 20th century.   First, the communal and symbolic uses of food began to dissipate. If "Food culture creates solidarity," (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997, 1) then the solidarity of African-Americans was challenged in the late 20th century. Soul food was dismissed as unhealthy and the cause of numerous health problems in the black community. Food became a battleground of health and social issues and no longer signified a gathering of community.

However, it may reasonably be argued that it is the proliferation of fast and convenience foods that have contributed mightily (Dalton 2004) to the decline of health (increased diabetes, heart disease, obesity, etc.) in the U.S. in general and in the African-American community in particular. As a targeted market of fast food outlets (Grier 2005), the African-American community, suffering the same economic and time constraints of other groups, began to succumb to the attraction of convenience foods (Dalton 2004).

I suggest that it was the incorporation of pre-packaged, convenience and fast foods into the African-American diet that contributed to the present health concerns. The African roots of soul food were surprisingly healthy. The use of fresh fruits, grains, nuts and vegetables, which were the primary sources of carbohydrates and protein in the African's diet, are what many now consider essential for a healthy lifestyle. Though the reasons were far from altruistic, the forced diet of the enslaved was one that maintained their health at top physical form (Perdue, Barden, and Phillips 1976). That diet became soul food, the food that has recently been decried as unhealthy and a harbinger of poor health outcomes. The consistent and long-term movement away from this diet, the incorporation of more meat-based proteins, and the movement from careful preparation to fast preparation that caused a dramatic shift in the diets and health of African-Americans.

As African-Americans adopted a less than palatable (and less than healthy) American diet, there were efforts to revive soul food. In the late 1960's, entrepreneurs began exporting soul food to "well-to-do" blacks in urban areas and the term "soul food" became a part of the common vernacular (www.foxhome.com/soulfood/htmls/soulfood.html). In today's culture we see soul food restaurants increasing in popularity in Harlem, NY with busloads of passengers – both black and white – seeking an authentic soul food experience. Few patrons remark on the irony of having to go out and buy what was once only suitable if home made. Soul food is now considered a "treat" - something for a special occasion, not food to nourish the body and soul on a daily basis. Soul food, and the symbols and culture that once accompanied it, has been effectively divorced from our daily rituals and our souls.

Religious culture began to get lost in the black community. Food culture began to get lost in the black community. The losses occurred simultaneously and together reflect a larger, more significant loss for African-Americans. The loss of these two elements represents a spiritual, emotional and communal dislocation. Whereas food and religious culture once centered on taking a very little bit and making it magnificent (as Jesus did), contemporary food and religious culture is focused on ease and largess. More privatized religion, more self-focus, more social gain, and more assimilation of the dominant perspective on the meaning of food ultimately yielded a communal and religious education loss over which we should all mourn. In order to return to the rich roots and traditions of the black community, the communal symbols of religion and food culture must be acknowledged and re-appropriated by African-Americans.

Saying Grace: Suggestions for Reappropriating Religious and Food Culture

It is imperative that the African-American community recognizes that *the family and the community offered us a prophetic grounding*. Soul food prepared by our families literally nurtured our prophetic voice. Time together as a family and community, time that always included prayer and food, provided the support, encouragement and guidance to engage in prophetic action. The family table is where those discussions were held. The community supper is where plans were made. These community, church and familial meetings do not exist with the same depth and breadth that they once did.

As religious culture offered a voice, black food culture offered a bond that transcended geography and circumstance. The preparation and sharing of food necessitated the handing down of the oral tradition which removed temporal and physical limits. Without this transcendent opportunity to cook and eat together, there is limited opportunity to pass on the oral tradition. The boundaries between African-Americans and their time and place become real and fixed; our historical perspective is dimmed. We must return to our tables, feed our souls and employ a historic understanding of the role of religion in the community in order to continue to make strides.

An important step in relocating black food culture is encouraging the cooking of food within the family and the community and to use those moments as opportunities to discuss our shared heritage and the role of religious culture within that heritage. The family table is an educative form – yet when the nightly meal hails from the golden arches, it is mis-educating those who are present and sends a message that the food is unimportant.

We must also develop opportunities to cook and eat and talk with our children. These are some of the finest forms of religious education available to us. If an intergenerational perspective is employed and grandparents and grandchildren are able to share this important time together, there is a real and significant opportunity for communal growth. Many soul food meals were celebrations of our extended family and a reminder that the sharing of food bonds us to our families, our communities and our history.

While we must not be naïve and ignore emerging health concerns, it is vital that we not assume soul food is the source of all things unhealthy. Assimilation into mainstream culture has resulted in increased time away from family, increased use of convenience and fast foods, and less time for physical activity resulting in increased negative health outcomes. "Obesity rates among adult Americans have doubled within the past 25 years. In 1999 - 2000, nearly 65 percent of U.S. adults were either overweight or obese" (Mancino, Lin, and Ballenger 2006, 145). This increase in poor health outcomes does not correlate with the presence of soul food on the tables of black families, but it does correlate with significant economic shifts in the black community. We must step back and examine those elements of the mainstream culture that are proving less than valuable for African-American culture such as the contemporary emphasis on convenience and independence in contrast to sharing and community. Researching and partaking in a healthy diet, such as those employed by our predecessors on this soil and early ancestors in Africa may help ameliorate many of the health concerns raised by our current food culture. Reviving our religious history to understand our past and to build our future is equally important.

Finally, it is imperative that we collect and pass down those recipes that have held great historic meaning in our community. Authors like Joyce White (1998) have certainly attempted to capture the importance of food to our religious and cultural lives and those efforts must be extended and sustained. There is a history to the foods of African Americans that needs to be expressed, shared and expanded.

Conclusion

As we sit down to say grace and extend our gratitude for the food before us, perhaps we should pray for the losses we have faced and ask for the strength to return these two foundational elements of black culture where they belong: at our tables; with our hearts; in our souls.

Bibliography

A history of soul food. (n.d.) www.foxhome,com/soulfood/htmls/soulfood.html.
Retrieved February 6, 2007.

Counihan, C. and Van Esterik, P. (Eds.) (1997). *Food and culture: A reader.* New York:
Routledge.

Dalton, Sharron (2006). "Eating fast food causes obesity." In *Food: opposing
viewpoints*. Laura K. Egendorf (Ed.) Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press.

Feeley-Harnick, G. (1981). *The Lord's table: Eucharist and Passover in early
Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Grier, S. (2005). *The food marketing environment of African-American consumers.*
www.ph.ucla.edu/cehd/events/SPH_CEHD_08102005_Grier_Presentation.pdf. Retrieved
September 18, 2007.

Harris, P., Lyon, D. and McLaughlin, S. (2005). *The Meaning of food.* Guilford, CT:
The Globe Pequot Press.

Hughes, M. (1997). "Soul food, black women, and food." In Counihan, C. and Van
Esterik, P. (Eds.) *Food and culture: A reader.* New York: Routledge.

Mancino, L., Lin, BH, and Ballenger, N. (2006). "Economic factors contribute to
obesity." In *Food: opposing viewpoints*. Laura K. Egendorf (Ed.) Farmington Hills, MI:
Greenhaven Press.

Perdue, Charles L., Jr., Barden, Thomas E. & Phillips, Robert K. (Eds.) (1976). *Weevils
in the wheat: Interviews with Virginia ex-slaves.* Charlottesville, VA: University Press
of Virginia.

Powdermaker, H. (1997). "An anthropological approach to the problem of obesity." In
Counihan, C. and Van Esterik, P. (Eds.) *Food and culture: A reader.* New York:
Routledge.

Sack, D. (2000). *Whitebread Protestants: Food and religion in American culture.* New
York: St. Martins Press.

Soler, J. (1997). "The semiotics of food in the Bible." In Counihan, C. and Van Esterik,
P. (Eds.) *Food and culture: A reader.* New York: Routledge.

White, J. (1998). *Soul food: Recipes and reflections from African-American churches.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers William Morrow Cookbooks.