

**Eating Together: The Hidden Story of the International  
Summer School on Religion and Public Life**

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ABSTRACT

The International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (ISSRPL) annually brings people from different religions to experiment and explore how to live together with difference. This article examines one aspect of the ISSRPL—how we eat together. The school was created to become a laboratory, a forum, for the practical pedagogy of tolerance and living with difference in a global society. Feeding forty people with very different religious and other food needs is a logistical as well as a symbolic nightmare. The development of the school’s approach to its food choices is traced through nine years of programming. Food, it is argued, is the “hidden story” of the ISSRPL. Each year, it becomes the locus where issues relevant to the major intellectual themes developed in the school bubble up. This paper looks carefully at “stories of food” and shows how themes such as exclusion versus inclusion, minority-majority relations, religion versus secularity, purity versus impurity, and others are played out. Is it possible to create a food program that will take into account each participant’s religious, symbolic, and physical needs? Can one create a program where everybody seated at the common table feels comfortable and accepted?

A group of forty people from different countries and religions are sitting together for three meals a day for two weeks. What enables this group of international participants who have different dietary restrictions to actually sit together? Observing the group, the joking around and the light atmosphere, the underlying challenges are not clearly apparent. Do they eat the same food? Do they enjoy the food? Do they resent it? Do they “really” sit together? Do they manage to create a communal table where everyone feels accepted and safe? Under the clatter of dishes and laughter, each year a story is taking shape, as food represents more than nutrition. This article focuses on that one aspect of the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (ISSRPL)—its food program. Learning to live together differently starts with learning to sit at a communal table together.

Anthropologists have long analyzed food as one marker of identity.<sup>2</sup> The importance of food lies in the fact that each one of us must eat, but food is always about more than nutrition. As such, food is a great topic through which to think about social structure as well as the self and its relation to culture and society because our food choices and preferences connect us with our societies.<sup>3</sup> Food is at once both culture and nutrition; each human culture creates for its members a visceral connection to individual and social identities with food. In a program such as the ISSRPL, when people from many nations come together, they meet the ‘other’ not only during lectures and visits but also in the local cuisine. In this article, I look at the ISSRPL table and its food, as they mirror themes discussed at the school. Each year the food becomes the locus where issues raised by the intellectual themes developed at the school bubble up. (Themes have included, for example, intra-religious purity in Turkey [2007]; the gospel of conversion and the inclusion of homosexuality in England [2008 and 2009]; collective belongings in Israel [2010]; and relations between the majority and minorities in Bulgaria [2011].) In this article, I argue that food is the hidden story of the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life.

### ***About the ISSRPL***

The ISSRPL program shies away from looking at our commonalities and, on the contrary, focuses the mind on what makes us different. As such, this program is not your usual interfaith work.<sup>4</sup> During these two weeks, we gaze into how what is important to each of us makes us different, i.e., religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. We try to put our own “moral communities” aside for these two weeks to see if we can create a group while acknowledging our deep differences. This program aims at helping participants look at their taken for granted assumptions while not seeing others as a projection of our own beliefs.

*At the school, I learned to see myself through the eyes of the other. As an Israeli Jew, I met these very sophisticated British Muslims who saw me and my country as evil. We became friends, we liked each other. I needed to explain myself to them, and I could not believe that they were seeing us as powerful and as a majority. We Israeli Jews, see ourselves as*

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*a minority. This is because we look at the geo-political context of the Middle East, and we are such a minority within a sea of Arab countries, but they see us as the majority and the Palestinians as a minority. This change of perspective was eye opening for me, and I have to understand how we are seen by others. We will never find a way to communicate and find solutions, if we cannot see ourselves as the other sees us. The program helped me shift my consciousness (translated from a taped interview with a fellow from the 2010 program).*

For fifteen days, a group of international fellows is brought together to debate, learn, and experience a topic relevant to a particular geo-political region. The goal of the program is to produce new practices and understandings for living together in a world populated by people with very different political ideas, moral beliefs, and communal loyalties. The program also aims to have fellows encounter assumptions they have hitherto taken for granted and learn from the experience as they reflect with “other” fellows from very different backgrounds. The school works toward this goal through a carefully designed program that combines the three major ways people learn: cognitive, experiential, and emotional/reflective.

The ISSRPL aims at providing a space where participants can learn about the differences that they bring to the communal table. It works on “group difference” through mutual exploration of a topic chosen each year by the director and the local host. For example, in July 2012 the topic will be how space is negotiated amongst religions in Indonesia. Together, we work on this topic through three modes of learning (intellectual, experiential, and reflective). The group is comprised of an international cohort so that we can see our “others,” the people we define as “other” than us, and be seen by them.

Authority is defined by those with more knowledge of the school’s chosen topic, but all of us have the power to contribute important knowledge from our own experience. For ISSRPL, the group is not the *overt focus* of the work. Rather, there is an outside interest that galvanizes the group and gives authorization to learn. The group becomes the *latent focus* of the work as each of us use it to look at our taken for granted cultural assumptions. We overtly focus on a specific topic related to tolerance and create a methodology where latent cultural structures might come to the awareness of our members. I write “might come” because this process of learning depends on the individual fellow and his or her willingness to engage with others. Our methodology is comprised of five basic elements, our three modes of learning (cognitive, practical, and reflective) plus our international membership. The fifth element of the ISSRPL is its reflexive stance that begins with its annual report and continues in an ongoing process of developmental evaluation conducted during the two weeks after the school is over.

The ISSRPL is also an itinerant yearly program. The school has been held in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia (2003, 2004); Jerusalem, Israel (2005); Stolac/Bosnia Herzegovina and Boston, USA (2006); Istanbul, Turkey (2007); Birmingham, UK (2008 and 2009); Nicosia, Cyprus and Jaffa, Israel (2010); and Bulgaria (2011) and in 2012, Indonesia.

The participants are experienced practitioners and postgraduate fellows. The school was created to become a laboratory, a forum, for the practical pedagogy of tolerance and living with differ-

ence in a global society. The participants, whom we call fellows, come from the four corners of the world. They belong to the three main monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) and also represent the diversity that exists within these religions. Some of the fellows are also ardent secularists with a strong interest in working on issues of religion and tolerance. The fellows range in age from the mid-20s to the mid-60s. Fellows have included NGO program officers, graduate students, professors, clergy, educators, political activists, psychologists, and lawyers.

Difference has become a central aspect of the program. The school began by focusing mainly on religious differences. The founders saw religious identities as central to people's sense of belonging and felt a need not to dismiss it as a thing of the past or as a source of all evil. The founders, themselves from different religious traditions, wanted to refocus on the sources of tolerance that can be found in these religious traditions. They believed that at the beginning of the twenty-first century we were witnessing a trend where religious communities were those to which many people devoted their greatest loyalties. As such, the program takes religion seriously. However, in the last few years, it has also dealt with other, equally critical and defining differences, such as gender, sexual preference, and communal and ethnic differences, examining how they intersect with religious belonging.

### ***My Role in the School***

The school is managed by two teams, one international and the other local. The international team is composed of four people: the founder-director, an organizer, a facilitator, and an evaluator-coach. The local team, depending on the year, is composed of three to four people: the local organizer(s) and administrative support. Each year the international team works with a different local team as the school moves from place to place. Local organizers are recruited from fellows committed to the mission who have an interest in organizing a school in their country and can acquire the knowledge, support, and at least some of the funds needed to do so.

My role in the international group is one of reflection. I am the participant-observer who has collected data on each program through the years. Each year I write a thirty- to forty-page report describing the experience, analyzing what was accomplished, and explaining how our goals were or were not achieved. Through the years, I have uncovered hidden goals that have become part of our design. For example, after the 2006 school, I became aware that "meeting the other and being seen by her" had become one of the goals of the school. This insight was incorporated on our web site and our brochure. Each year I suggest a series of steps to improve the structure and add to the library of our practical knowledge. As a result, my reports have helped shape future schools.

Having written for many years on the issue of tolerance and pluralism, the founder wanted to create a more pragmatic approach to learning. Driven by a need to understand in practice how, fifty years after the Holocaust, a population (this time Muslims and not Jews) was again being massacred in the middle of Europe, he made the decision to start the school with a group of his friends

and colleagues in Sarajevo in 2002. The first year, in 2003, I attended ISSRPL as the founder's wife and also as a mother, with my then seven year old in tow, and taught yoga to the fellows. For the second year, the local host asked me to create a program on women and water.<sup>5</sup> I worked with local Muslim women on the significance of menstruation and purification in Judaism and Islam and organized an academic panel on the topic. At that time, I was starting to evaluate educational programs in the Boston area, so my interest was also shifting to a more practical approach to knowledge. I volunteered my skills and helped the ISSRPL organizers reflect on their goals and methods.

The first years were structured as purely academic learning and did not take into account the other ways in which people learn. For example, people were asked to sit facing front for six hours through lectures, and even when we traveled to sites, the intellectual focus continued to dominate. Very little provision was made for individuals as entire human beings; for example, there were no bathroom breaks, meals were scheduled at irregular and inconvenient hours, no time was set aside for reflection, and we had not yet realized how important recognizing the embodied self is for the learning process. The phrase "embodied self" highlights the reality that we are in bodies; we are situated in personal as well as collective histories, and we need to take this into account as we create structures that will allow people to learn. As intellectuals, the founders had created a structure where the mind was privileged. After all, this was a program created by academics with a strong mission and sense of historic necessity, but with very little notion of a pedagogy other than heavy academic and intellectual learning.

Nevertheless, crucial learning happened on many levels during those first few years. We not only studied the history, sociology, and religion of the post-Soviet countries, but the organizers also learned from scratch how to create a program that would allow fellows to actually learn from and face difference in a safe environment. Our own goals became clearer as they emerged from within the program. We had to move away from a university-based approach to a more integrated and multifaceted learning environment in which mind, body, and emotions became integrated through direct encounters in very difficult situations.<sup>6</sup> The uniqueness of this program lies in its ability to balance the three components—mind, body, and emotion—none of which has taken the front seat since 2005. It is this balance that provides the most fertile ground for people to confront their assumptions and debate the difficult question, "How do we live together in a global world?" This is a very concrete question, and the school does not claim that it has answers. However, it does claim that it provides a successful practice through which fellows can develop their own answers. The organizers believe in one fundamental principle: only via an attitude of epistemological modesty<sup>7</sup> and a series of very practical steps can we find a way to live and affirm our collective identity without abusing anyone else.<sup>8</sup> Now let's turn to one of the major challenges of such a collective practice: how do we eat together?

### ***Food Stories***

Feeding forty people with very different religious and other restrictions regarding their diets—all within a tight budget—is surely a daunting prospect. At first, there was not very much awareness around issues of food beside the obvious fact that we needed to take care of our minorities' needs (Jews and Muslims). As noted earlier, most energy was focused on the intellectual program and vision. We learned, however, that offering good food is essential for the successful operation of the school. People become very cranky when the food is either not good or not plentiful. Feeding people is thus not only a logistical matter; it is also essential to meet people's basic needs. Anthropologists have pointed to the importance of food in building and symbolizing identity.<sup>9</sup> Because food represents more than nutrition, it took us a few years to realize that in each food choice lies the hidden story of that year's school. Food is the prism through which a vista opens up into the hidden aspects of the themes under discussion. Each year intrinsic learning happened through food. Let me start by recalling the history of the food program at the school through the years.

During the first two years of ISSRPL, in Bosnia in 2003 and 2004, there was no real awareness at the school about how to “do the food.” As already mentioned, the school is organized by two teams, one international and the other local, who work together to design the yearly program. As the school moves from country to country, the local team, led by a local host, is different each year. The local host is generally an academic, and the school is almost always hosted by a combination of an academic institution and a NGO. Until 2011, when it came to food, the international team deferred to the local team, which was made aware of the diversity of the group and was asked to provide food that all participants could eat.

In both 2003 and 2004, the Bosnian host chose local Muslim restaurants that served halal food. Since Christians have no religious taboos around food, no provision was made for them; they were expected to eat the local food, and they did. The local host made special provision for those Jewish participants who requested it. Most of them ate vegetarian dishes, and some Orthodox Jewish fellows requested to have their fish cooked in double-wrapped foil. This solution worked in Bosnia, but when we visited Croatia in 2004, problems arose. For example, at the last festive banquet, prepared by a Croatian chef, shellfish, roasted pork, and other local delicacies were served. As a result, Muslim and Jewish participants were not able to partake in that festive meal. Rumors circulated among the group that the cook had done this on purpose to alienate the Bosnian Muslims. In Israel (2005), kosher food was served for all. Muslim participants ate the kosher food; when asked, they told us that in their mind standards for kosher meat are more stringent than those for halal meat, so they were allowed to eat the kosher meat. That year the food was excellent, and people raved about the quantity and the quality of the food. The following year, in Bosnia and Boston (2006), we reverted to halal meat and the fish solution for Jewish participants. In Boston, the food was prepared at the Hebrew College kosher cafeteria, and all could eat.

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### ***Food Issues within a Religious Group***

As previously noted, it is the local host, who is most familiar with the local environment, who decides on the food program after being apprised by the international team of the diversity of the group. In Turkey in 2007, Jewish participants who wanted kosher food had their food provided by the Jewish community in Istanbul or Bursa, while everybody else ate the food prepared at the Bilgi University halal cafeteria. Only once did we encounter a problem feeding our Muslims fellows, when we visited the Alevi community, a different group of Turkish Muslim citizens.

The Alevites constitute the second-largest ethnic group in Turkey, about twenty-five percent of the population, or about fifteen million people. Some Alevites say that the proportion is about thirty to forty percent. Sunni Islam, the dominant and generally accepted orthodoxy in the Turkish state, has branded Alevism as heretical and has encouraged distorted perceptions of Alevism as sectarian “others.” The stigma that got attached to them in the past is still prevalent today. In the eyes of many Sunnis, Alevis are unclean, practice immorality and orgies, and are not true Muslims. None of this background was explained to us before we took to the road for our meeting with the Alevi community on the outskirts of Istanbul. Our leaders for that outing were two staff members: the assistant to one of our local hosts, a Sunni Muslim, and her young student helper, a Turkish Kurd. As we arrived at the Alevi communal building or center, we were warmly welcomed and taken on a tour. We were shown their different social and ritual spaces and also the morgue where they wash their dead. After the visit, we were offered a meal, after which we witnessed a very elaborate ritual.<sup>10</sup>

In the middle of the ritual, our staff member, the young Kurdish woman, became sick to her stomach. I learned later that she and the other Sunni Muslims fellows had not eaten the Alevi food. The fact that our Muslim Sunni fellows did not eat the food was kept quiet; the organizers learned about it only after the summer school ended, when the Kurdish student told us that she had been ashamed of not eating their food. She told us that after having experienced the summer school, she understood her own prejudices and felt ashamed of herself for having behaved toward the Alevi the same way as the Sunni Muslims behave toward her Kurdish community, who are also seen by the Sunnis as unclean and have been treated harshly by the Turkish government.<sup>11</sup> The story was corroborated by another person, a Jew who sat at the same table as the Sunni Muslim fellows; she reported that nobody but she ate the food served at the table. I sat at a table with an African American Muslim, who did eat the food.

That year the group of Muslim fellows came from Turkey, Africa, Bosnia, and America. At the time of the Alevi visit, the organizers were clueless about the unfolding drama among the Muslim fellows. The antagonism between different Muslim sects was kept quiet on the public scene, during the summer school, but it nonetheless simmered and bubbled to the surface in a few cases, particularly with regard to the cleanliness of the food and the implied question about who counts as a real Muslim. Since food is viscerally connected to belonging and identity,<sup>12</sup> in 2007 it became

the locus of issues of belonging between the subgroups of Muslims. Becoming aware of the divisions between these subgroups of Muslims was one of the most important lessons I learned that year.<sup>13</sup> The theme discussed in 2007 in Turkey was the legacy of empire and the nation state. In their conflict over whose food to eat, we witnessed the rejection of certain groups from the Muslim collective among our Muslim fellows—basically, an internal conflict within the Muslim group over who belongs and who is the “other” within their own religious tradition.

In 2008, the school moved to England, where the local host, a self-proclaimed secularist with strong humanistic values, wanted to make sure that everyone ate the same food. He had been a fellow in Istanbul and did not like the fact that people of different religions were served different food there. In his mind, the program’s aim of addressing differences meant that we should all be subjected to the same food. He felt that following the Alevi case the year before, we needed to make sure that all were included and that food did not become a locus of discord. Therefore, we all ate vegetarian, mostly vegan, food. That year people complained at length about the food and the lack thereof; in addition, one person with Celiac disease was not able to eat most of the time.<sup>14</sup> The food was very bland and seen as no more than basic sustenance. On the surface, it seems that food did not become an issue in 2008, but when we look closely at one particular occasion, the picture is much more complex.

On Sunday, August 27, 2008, a week and a day into the program, we visited Birmingham’s Journey Metropolitan Community Church, whose members are mostly homosexual, and watched the movie *Trembling before God*, a documentary about gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. Local organizers were very worried that the encounter with the church would be difficult and perhaps even explosive. They feared that fellows would be made uncomfortable by any possible show of feelings between members of the church. Many fellows reported both this encounter and the movie as very powerful and difficult experiences that opened their thinking about homosexuality and made them “less rigid,” in the words of one Muslim. The screening of the movie in that locale was followed by a discussion, in which our local and international hosts commented on what a huge impression the humanity and suffering of the people portrayed in the movie had made on many fellows. People were indeed uncomfortable, in a few cases due to the homosexuality of the church’s members; but many more reported discomfort with the “Flower Communion,” a ritual established in the Episcopal Church in the 1930s, and the dinner that was subsequently served at this locale.

In the “Flower Communion” ritual, people join at the altar and, instead of taking the Eucharist, take a flower that “speaks to them,” sit down, meditate on the flower, and then return it and take the flower of another person. The church had our whole group take part, and some fellows felt uncomfortable being asked to participate actively in such a ritual, which they understood as directly related to Christian communion (even if our hosts intended it to be a universal ritual that could encompass all humanity). In fact, this inclusion effort on the part of the Journey Metropolitan Community Church was understood by fellows as basically not respecting difference, especially of Muslims and Jews. Also, more importantly for the topic at hand, the church was the

only place where some Muslims and Jews had a problem with the food that was served, since the Journey Metropolitan Community Church served pork sausage on the same plate as vegetarian hot dogs (although vegetarian food was available on other plates). Everywhere else the food prepared had been fully vegetarian, so that everyone could eat the same food. People at the church had not understood that serving pork, albeit with vegetarian dishes available, was not acceptable to the observant Muslim and Jewish fellows. As a result, most Muslims and Jews could not eat any of the food served and stood outside during the evening meal.

Our local host had designed the meal program in 2008 to ensure that food was void of all that makes it so pregnant with meaning, but during the meal at the church, issues of inclusion and exclusion came to the forefront again. By not knowing or not taking into account Muslim and Jewish fellows' food needs, the church members effectively excluded them from the meal, while at the same time attempting to include them in a very universal approach to worship, which some of the fellows could not accept.<sup>15</sup>

In the second year in Birmingham (2009), our same host still wanted to design a food program with inclusion at its core, believing that everyone had to eat the same kind of food at the same table. This time he chose a better-quality option, but purposely and mischievously selected a lesbian cooperative to cook our food.<sup>16</sup> By choosing the lesbian cooperative, our host connected his food choices to the gay and lesbian issues discussed at the school. The debates at the two Birmingham schools in 2008 and 2009 thus centered on issues of gay belonging and the gospel of conversion. The school aims to create a space where people can deal with their strong feelings toward what they perceive as sacred, while respecting the boundaries of the other. We had fellows who believe that homosexuality is a sin, and we had gay fellows; we had people who believe in the gospel of conversion to Christianity as essential to save people's souls, and we had others who saw this belief as a direct threat to their well-being. Again, some of these issues clearly played out through the prism of food. The experience at the church in 2008 reflected the dual problems of "forced" inclusion during the universal ritual and "forced" exclusion through the serving of pork.

In 2010, the school was hosted in two places: Cyprus and Israel. The local organizer worked with two staff people, one in Nicosia and the second in Jaffa. Having now been sensitized to the food issue as a result of past years, the international staff asked the local host to be very mindful of the importance of reflecting on food choices. In 2010, we became keenly aware that feeding a mixed group of fellows means more than providing them with basic sustenance. As noted earlier, the international team had always given the local organizer "carte blanche" regarding how to organize the food to accommodate every single one of the participants.<sup>17</sup> I highlight here *every single one*, because a program dealing with difference needs to figure out the realities of feeding people of different religions and different levels of observance. In 2010, the local host faced the same dilemma we had had in previous years, as we had two observant Jews and two observant Muslims among the fellows. His choices, however, left some people with uneasy feelings. We had many kinds of complaints about the food, and I would argue that food again reflected some of the main

issues discussed during these two weeks: who belongs, and whose rules need to be followed?

In Cyprus, most of our lunches were at the university cafeteria, which provided a few fish or vegetarian choices, which were fine for all participants. Each night, however, we went out for very elaborate meals in fancy restaurants. On the Greek side, no accommodation was made for Jewish and Muslim observances, so much so that on our last night in Cyprus the restaurant served only pork (and some vegetarian *mezze!*). On the Turkish side, all the restaurants served halal meat, and the Muslim fellows were able to eat. The Jewish fellows ate the very elaborate vegetarian *mezze*. For the first few nights, people were quite happy with these elaborate meals, but after a few days the quantity and waste started to annoy most of the fellows. In addition, these elaborate meals were scheduled quite late and far away from our accommodation. Fellows began to complain about the time spent waiting for other fellows to take the bus, the hours spent sitting around in restaurants, and the unnecessary amount of food served. Two huge meals a day was felt to be a waste of both food and time. We would return to the university quite late, with dinner scheduled to start at 9:00 p.m., but it generally started later than that. There was one exception to this feeling of malaise surrounding the food in Cyprus: even though it was at the end of a very long day, people tremendously enjoyed the dinner in Famagusta. The food was fish-based, so all could eat, and the restaurant was located on the beach, so fellows took this opportunity to have their first dip in the Mediterranean Sea. This was the highlight of a very intense day. In Cyprus, no kosher food was provided, but in most places provision was made for vegetarian food and sometimes for fish.

We then stayed in Israel for six days. On the first day, one of our fellows led a group discussion summarizing the Cyprus experience, at which fellows expressed their dismay concerning the food there, especially the waste and the lateness. On the second day in Israel, a Friday, organizers felt that there still was some unfinished business with regard to food and opened up a space for a group discussion on the subject. We became aware of the perception among some of the Jewish fellows that most dinners would not be kosher in Israel. I myself shared this perception, and it was only after the end of the program when I carefully looked at my notes and the data I had collected that I understood that this perception was incorrect. Breakfast was served at the kosher hotel, four of the five lunches were eaten in kosher institutions, and three of the six dinners took place in kosher restaurants or were catered. Only three of the six dinners and one lunch took place in non-kosher, local Palestinian restaurants that served halal meat. Thus, most of the food served during the week in Israel was kosher. Why then did this perception—that most of the food would be non-kosher—become so prominent among the Jewish participants and organizers?

Food became the locus for the feeling that the program in Israel did not provide a space for a certain Zionist vision. For our host, serving non-kosher food had been a conscious choice; eating in Palestinian restaurants in Jaffa reflected his vision of the program as needing to allow each one of us to face our limits. He wanted Jewish participants and others to grasp that non-kosher Palestinian food is as much a part of the national collective as kosher food. He did not say this explicitly, but his food choices did, in fact, mirror some of his programmatic decisions regarding

activities in Israel. The organizers had wanted to follow the Cyprus model, but for some reason, this plan did not work as intended. In Israel, for example, the panel on the different historical narratives of the conflict did not offer a history of the conflict from each group's perspective as it had in Cyprus. Instead, the presenters used the lectures to put forward their own political agenda; instead of meeting the actors and producers of the movie *Ajami*, as intended, we ended up meeting local activists intent on demonizing the Israeli state. Not only Jewish fellows, but many others as well, complained that the program in Israel was unbalanced, had manipulated feelings, and leaned heavily toward the Palestinian narrative and their suffering. Our fellows became aware that the Zionist point of view had not been presented fully, and many reflected that they would have liked a more balanced approach to our time in Jaffa.

For one American Jew in particular, the fact that non-kosher food was served in Israel proved very difficult. He had assumed that he would be able to eat all the food once the program moved to Israel from Cyprus. For him, having to deal with non-kosher food in Cyprus felt very different from being served non-kosher food in Israel. The choice of non-kosher food for the group in Israel became the arena in which different visions of what constitutes the national collective played out. Feeding people in Israel was perceived as the ultimate tool used to define who is part of the national Jewish or Israeli collective. The food issue only reinforced the feeling that not everyone was given a place at the table for these two weeks.

At the very least, food choices should have been clarified and tied into the explicit learning of the school and its hoped-for outcomes. We learned during the 2010 school that it was essential to take stock of who is at the table and understand the symbolic power and ramifications of our food choices. The questions remained: should everyone eat the same food? Should non-kosher food be served to fellows in Israel? What kind of provisions need to be put in place for everyone to feel welcome at the table?

### ***Food Issues and the Majority***

In the summer of 2011, the program was held in Bulgaria, where we tried to implement the philosophy of looking at “who will be at the table” before making decisions. Before the program began, we sent out a request for fellows to tell us about their dietary needs. Some of our Muslim fellows, who ate only halal meat, were willing to eat vegetarian food or chicken. As we did not have any very observant Jewish fellows, the level of kashrut<sup>18</sup> was not a problem. For two of our visiting guests who adhered to stricter kashrut, we managed to bring in certified kosher food from Sofia; another participant asked for his fish to be cooked in aluminum foil. After the 2010 program, staff, both international and local, decided to curtail problems by removing pork as an option. Fellows would be given a choice of chicken, fish, or vegetarian dishes. Our Bulgarian local host, who had been a fellow in the 2010 school, worked with local restaurants to create menus with as many choices as possible within these three categories and within the budget. The food was mainly

Bulgarian cuisine. Breakfast was served at the hotel and included all kinds of choices, one of them being pork. Each day fellows needed to decide on their food choices for the next day. This created some logistical problems, and it took some time for us to find a system that the different restaurants could accommodate ahead of time. In 2011, there were initially no issues about food, and the fellows seemed to be happy with what was served at the different restaurants. I was coming to the conclusion that our rule of the three choices had solved the problem! Then, during the last days of the program, the issue of food resurfaced.

At the last of the six small group facilitation sessions of this year,<sup>19</sup> a person in my small group asked in anger and frustration, “Why did we not have pork?” The following day, during the last group evaluation and just before the closing ceremony, another person in a small group session uttered a similar feeling of frustration with the food: “I would have wanted the school to serve pork and more Bulgarian food.” A few more fellows wrote in their answers to the final questionnaires that they had wanted more Bulgarian food, and the issue also came up during the last evaluation session.<sup>20</sup>

What is the meaning of those statements about wanting more Bulgarian food, when all the food served was indeed Bulgarian? The only typically Bulgarian items that were not served during the two weeks were pork and alcohol, though fellows could buy alcohol if they wanted. During one of the plenary sessions, a Muslim woman thanked a Christian fellow for asking her if he could order a beer while they were seated at the same table. She had been moved by his caring and taking her religious needs into consideration. She was happy to have him buy his beer. I witnessed the exchange, and it was retold to me by another woman, a Christian, who asked why this fellow should have to accommodate the Muslim fellow’s religious needs. Couldn’t she accommodate him? Why should he be the one to accommodate her? Why was he expected to take her needs into account and not vice versa? It is always the minority who asks for these kinds of provisions, she concluded.

Let us look at the demographics of the 2011 fellows. We had twenty-nine fellows from Bulgaria, Russia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Indonesia, Ukraine, Romania, Kosovo, Russia, Bosnia, USA, Sweden, Israel, and Palestine (Israel). The majority (16) were women, and they ranged in age from their late 20s to their late 50s. They were schoolteachers, educators, social workers, social activists, clergy, professors, and graduate students. Five fellows were “locals” from Bulgaria; all the others were “international.” Most came from places rife with interreligious challenges and shared a strong interest in the workings of religion(s) in the public sphere. Religion was more than an academic topic for the majority of fellows, who as a group were deeply involved in their religions and identified strongly with their own traditions. We had eight Muslims, sixteen Christians (Evangelical Protestant, Charismatic, Methodist, Anglicans, Catholic, Bulgarian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox), and two Jews (one of whom was spiritual, meaning a believer in a universal god without borders).

The majority of fellows in 2011 were Christians. We had assumed during past years that because Christians have no food restrictions, they will eat any good food. On the other hand, we had

also understood that we needed to be very careful to enable our minorities, Muslims and Jews, to sit at the common table. The position of the majority never became an issue until 2011.

The relation between minority and majority was a central aspect of the intellectual learning this year, as many lectures engaged with the situation of different minorities, such as the Roma and the Muslim Bulgarians. To my question, “Has your cognitive understanding of the ‘other’ been transformed by your experience the last two weeks? If yes, in what ways?” an Orthodox Christian who had declared herself/himself nonreligious at the beginning of the program wrote the following:

Yes! In this context, I felt a stronger belonging feeling to the Orthodox Church, even if I was not a religious person. The fact that I felt this and the new formal and informal information I gained on Islam and Judaism, gave me the opportunity to better understand the sorrow that the persons belonging to a religious minority could experience when they are challenged by majority.

This person was able to see the world for a little while as the minority would. She was able to empathize with the pain of being always in the position of fending for yourself and not having your needs taken into account. One of the Jewish fellows, after the school, compared his feeling of ease with regard to the food situation during the two weeks with his past experiences at academic conferences around the world. He reported having felt anxious about what he would be able to eat at conferences, while during this two-week program he did not think about the food, knowing that he could rely on what was served. He had happily eaten vegetarian or fish dishes every day.

I would like to claim that the importance of food is that people take what they eat for granted, and only when faced with challenges does food become an issue. When you are a Jewish participant in a European conference, for example, and no kosher food has been provided for you by the organizers, you see your needs very clearly. For the majority of participants at the same conference, there is no awareness that food is more than something to be enjoyed or not. Being a member of the majority means not being challenged in your basic food choices. It means not being aware of making assumptions regarding food choices. When we are the majority, among people who eat vegetarian or kosher, we take it for granted that we will be able to eat, because everyone at the table has the same needs. Everyone is basically like us. In Israel in 2010, the food became a problem for some Jewish participants, because they had expected that when in Israel, all the food served would be available for them to eat. When it was not, it raised strong feelings. Only when faced with problems do we understand that our food defines who we are. Any majority in any context is not aware that what they eat is connected to who they are; it is only when confronted by a vocal minority that what the majority eats becomes problematic and that the majority then become aware of their food as a marker of identity. *The absence of restrictions on our food choices is as important in defining who we are as is the existence of such restrictions (in the form of kashrut or hallal, for example).*

I argue that in 2011, some fellows recognized that the summer school had gone to great lengths to allow Muslims and Jews to eat and feel part of the group. The issue of recognizing some Christian religious needs came up a few times during the program. We had seven kinds of Christians in

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2011, and during the two weeks of the program, a few Christian fellows asked why the organizers did not include a visit to “their kind of church” in the program. It was explained that we tried to visit all churches, but with seven kinds of Christians, this was not feasible, and this year’s program needed to focus on the Bulgarian reality. In focusing on minority-majority relations in Bulgaria and catering to the school’s minorities (Muslims and Jews), the program in 2011 determined that the majority position also needed to be taken into account. The program made clear to the majority that all food choices are ideological and constitute part of what makes us who we are. *Minority and majority meet symbolically through the food served at the school.*

In 2011, some fellows from the Christian majority who eat pork felt their food choices were challenged by a program that made sure to give a voice in food choices to the minority. Some Christian fellows felt that as a result, their individuality had not been recognized in the main group. The minority’s food needs thus came to represent a threat for some members of the majority. Through the food, they viscerally understood that their majority position was being undermined and that they were being asked to accommodate the minority. This theme played out in many discussions during the two weeks. For example, when the role of the *hijab* in Europe was discussed in a plenary session, one of the Muslim women fellows was asked by other fellows why she could not remove hers to be allowed to participate in a particular Orthodox Christian ritual. This theme had created some tensions among fellows.

The issue of recognizing the religious needs of some Christian fellows arose again as they became aware that the program took the minority’s needs into account. In the realm of food, it is because they were seated with the minority that they saw their own needs as an identity marker. As time passed, and in the last few days of the program, I noticed more segregated seating among some of our fellows than at the beginning. It is not only the content of what we eat that constructs our identity, but also the context in which we eat it that makes us aware of our food as a marker of identity. *I would argue here that it is this context that brings identity issues to the surface, not just the actual food we eat.*

We organizers had assumed that because Christians have no food restrictions, they also have no symbolic needs around food. What we failed to realize is that food is pregnant with meaning for all, not just the minority. Seeing our roles as making sure that all could eat, we went to a great deal of effort to cater to our minorities by introducing the rule of the three food options (chicken, vegetarian, or fish). Even after all these years, we still privileged the pragmatic aspect of food: people need to eat. Not being able to eat pork, without also being acknowledged as having given up something important for the sake of the group, created strong feelings for people whose diet includes pork as a staple. In meeting and needing to accommodate to the minority, the majority came to see that what they eat is more than a food choice; it defines who they are.

I think that we can learn from the “no pork,” “Bulgarian food,” and “traditional food” complaints that emerged at the end of the Bulgarian program that feeding the majority needs to be reckoned with just as much as feeding the minority—food is always more than sustenance. In

2011, food as an issue surfaced at the end of the program and encapsulated some of the topics of belonging and majority-minority relations that had been the themes of the school.

### ***Conclusion***

In all past yearly programs, it seemed that food was always a locus where themes discussed in the school bubbled up. As we have seen here, choices staff made in relation to food reflected their own philosophical or political positions. In Birmingham, one of our past hosts did not want eating choices to be regulated only by religious motives, and we all ate “from the same table.” He wanted maximum inclusion for all, which was not always successful, as in the case of the Journey Metropolitan Community Church, where our minority met with exclusion. In Israel, we were purposely taken to non-kosher restaurants, because eating non-kosher food was deemed (by our host) to be as important as eating kosher food in the Israeli context. In his mind, it gave voice and space to oppose what was, for him, “the Jewish orthodox hegemony,” and in doing so recreated the major fault lines of Israeli society in our small group. In Bulgaria, food choices became part of the bigger issue of making the majority accommodate the minority among us, and for some it was not easy.

Each year food becomes the locus where issues relevant to the major intellectual themes developed in the school bubble up: in Turkey, purity/impurity and rejection of the other within; in England, exclusion/inclusion of gayness into the collective; in Israel, religion/secularity and inclusion of the Palestinian other within the Israeli collective; in Bulgaria, minority-majority relations, who needs to accommodate who, and why?

So what should the ISSRPL do: serve pork? This would certainly not be viable for such a program.<sup>21</sup> If food is always a way for people to come to understand wider themes discussed at the school, we should instead turn the fact of “eating together” into a pedagogical tool. Fellows need to become aware early on of what is involved in “eating together” and what provisions each of us needs to make to be part of the ISSRPL table for these two weeks. I contend that by opening up the food theme in the program, fellows might be able to understand and work on their previously unchallenged assumptions regarding food and on what it means to accommodate for the sake of building a community.

Ultimately, the message of the school is all about how we can create a society in which we confront our prejudices in our daily practices. Organizers need to make clear the values behind their food choices. In a program focusing on difference, it might simply not be possible to create a food program in which each person’s needs are catered to. The school needs to create a space in its program to engage in the complexities of the food choices it makes and what it means to give up some food options in return for the clear benefit of being able to include everyone in the program. Only then might we be able to enjoy the local cuisine without having it embody the wider, emotionally charged issues discussed at the school. To appreciate our differences fully, we must first understand our own food choices as well as those of others, and then make corresponding adjust-

ments for the sake of living in this unique community for these two weeks.

*(Endnotes)*

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**1** Rahel Wasserfall is an anthropologist and research visiting scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University. She is also the internal evaluator on staff of the ISSRPL. Until recently, she was the director of evaluation for HATC (Hebrew at The Center) and a senior researcher at Education Matters, Inc. and at the Mandel Center for Jewish Education at Brandeis. My thanks go to Adam Seligman, Ed Schapiro, Deborah Fogel, and Rebecca Kornblatt for their careful reading and thoughtful engagement with my arguments.

**2** Sidney Cheung, "Anthropology of Food," SciTopics, [http://www.scitopics.com/Anthropology\\_of\\_Food.html](http://www.scitopics.com/Anthropology_of_Food.html) (accessed February 28, 2012); Sidney Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (November 2002): 99-119.

**3** See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964). Here the famous anthropologist explains how through an analysis of myth and the place of food we can understand deep social structures.

**4** I have been to many interfaith dialogues where the aim is to find commonalities between participants. At the ISSRPL, we do not avoid feeling uncomfortable when we take a look at what separates us from others. We look at this "being uncomfortable" while working toward a common goal in a group situation.

**5** I am an anthropologist with many years of experience working on gender in the Middle East and have edited *Women and Water: Menstruation and Law in Judaism* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). I have conducted three of these programs, two in Bosnia and one in Bulgaria. The first two programs were academic panels, but in 2011 we created a program more in line with our pedagogical vision of the three intertwined modes of learning. I am also a trained yoga teacher in the Iyengar tradition.

**6** We were located in Mostar in 2003 and 2004, while that city was still in the middle of rebuilding, and we could see the destroyed buildings from the windows of our Hotel Bristol. The center of the town and the famous bridge were slowly being rebuilt, but the atmosphere was of destruction. We also traveled to a monastery in Trebnje, where we were not made very welcome and where we encountered some strange behaviors. We learned that Suljo Karajic might have been in hiding there during the time of our visit. Suljo Karajic was found guilty of crimes against prisoners of war and civilians in the Bihac district and sentenced in 2010 to 18 years of imprisonment by the court of Bosnia Herzegovina.

7 See Adam B. Seligman, *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Toleration and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) and Menachem Fisch, “A Modest Proposal: Toward a Religious Politics of Epistemic Humility,” *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 1 (March 2003): 49-64.

8 In sutra II. 3, Bouanchaud’s commentary explains that when each person can face her/his fears, s/he will be able to affirm her/his individual identity without abusing anyone. I am taking the liberty of using the idea but changing the focus to our collective and not individual self. See Bernard Bouanchaud, *The Essence of Yoga: Reflections on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Portland, OR: Rudra Press, 1997), 78.

9 Mai Yamani, “You Are What You Cook: Cuisine and Class in Mecca,” in *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 173-184; N. Baumel Joseph, “From Baghdad to Montreal: Food, Gender and Identity in Two Scenarios;” in *Migration, Communication & Home: Jewish Tradition, Change & Gender in a Global World*, ed. Tania Reytan-Marincheshka (Sofia, Bulgaria: LIK Publishing House, Sofia, 2011), 92-104; and Joëlle Bahloul, *Le Culte de la Table Dressée: Rites et Tradition de la Table Juive Algérienne* (Paris : Métailié, 1983).

10 From David Zeidan, “The Alevi of Anatolia,” December 1995, <http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/ALEVI.html> (accessed March 25, 2012): “Rituals (*ibadet*) are communal, their aim being unity (*birlik*) and love (*muhabbet*) within the community. They express God’s love to man, His most perfect creation in whom He manifests himself.

**Alevi** rituals differ markedly from those of Sunnis: they fast in the month of Muharram for 12 days in memory of Hussein’s death at Karbala and the sufferings of the 12 Imams; this fast is called *yas* and reaches its climax on the day of Ashura, in which symbolic foods are eaten and *nefes* recited, the early tragedy symbolizing all discrimination and persecution suffered by Alevis since then.

**The** central ritual of Alevi religious life is the *ayn-i cem* (*cem* for short) celebration that is a replay of Muhammad’s legendary heavenly journey (*mirac*) with the assembly of forty (*kirkklar meclisi*), combined with a memorial to the suffering of the Twelve Imams. A sacrificial meal (*lokma*), a ritual alcoholic drink, *nefes* hymns accompanied by music on the *saz*, dance (*sema*), and the ritual lighting and extinguishing of candles are elements of the celebration. The *ayn-i cem* takes place only when distrusted outsiders are not present and is held at night under great secrecy—a fact that opened it to Sunni speculations of immorality. Once a year this ritual is held under the leadership of a *dede* assisted by a *rehber* in a private house or a communal building (*cemevi*) attended by women on almost equal footing with men.”

11 I will not expand on the complex relations between the Turkish government and the Kurdish minority here. The young staff member spoke at length about the harsh treatment to her father and uncle by the Turkish government; she explained that Kurds are despised by the Turks, and there is a lot of animosity between the groups. See “Who Are the Kurds?” *Washington Post*, 1999, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/feb99/kurdprofile.htm> (accessed March 25, 2012). The famous British anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that symbolic boundaries between groups are played out through concepts such as “dirt.” See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

12 See footnote 9 above.

13 There were also some tensions between subgroups of Jews that came to the surface at the Friday night service in Bursa. See Rahel Wasserfall, “Meeting the Other,” in preparation.

**14** As this person was a local fellow and slept at home, each day she would bring food with her to add to the food provided.

**15** The flower ritual is a communion. The Anglican Church and Christianity in general is a universal religion, seeking to accept everyone into their fold. Muslims and Jews have a different approach to religion, and they cannot accept rituals that claim to be universal and that by default will count them as Christians, because this would mean accepting the Christian creed and Jesus as their savior.

**16** I interview all staff members and some fellows during or after each program, and I had many discussions with our British host regarding his understanding of the importance of homosexuality in British society and in the program.

**17** ISSRPL started by taking the needs of our minorities very seriously, but it took us a few programs to understand that in the food, there is more than food. The point of this article is to show that in eating together we face our differences, and this is not an easy process. As far as I know, this claim has never been made before and in a situation where, for example, the lower house of the Parliament of the Netherlands (by a wide margin!) prohibited halal and kosher slaughter, this is no marginal insight (BBC News, June 28, 2011). On March 2, 2012, the Dutch senate cancelled the ban after an uproar but is moving to tighten the regulations on ritual slaughtering (*The Huffington Post*, World, March 2, 2012).

**18** Kashrut literally means “allowed.” It refers to a series of laws that regulate what can and cannot be eaten according to Jewish Law (Halacha). A food is “kosher” according to these very intricate laws. There are many levels of observances in the Jewish world. For example, Orthodoxy allows only food that has been ritually inspected and stamped by a seal of approval. Vegetables and fruits do not need a special seal, but all other food requires it. Meat and milk products need to be separated, and only certain animals are allowed to be eaten. Meat needs to be ritually slaughtered to be accepted. There is a huge range of complexities of practices among different Jews. One cannot take for granted what another Jew from another community will eat.

**19** We processed the experience in small facilitation groups. In the past, all staff but the facilitator and I had been members of these small groups. This year it was decided that I would also be part of this experience, and I was assigned to a small facilitation group.

**20** The methodological question of the outlier story as a trigger for evaluation is discussed in another paper. “Dissonant Story as an Evaluative Tool,” presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association (AEA), Anaheim, California, November 4, 2011.

**21** Actually, in both our locations in Bulgaria, pork was a buffet option for breakfast. This did not solve the problem, as we ate with other guests, and breakfast was not perceived as an ISSRPL meal per se.