

2013/2014 Graduate Research Grant Report
Religion and Diversity Project

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Meals that Matter: Jewish and Muslim participation in the Toronto Food Movement

My research explores some of the unexpected contours of religious diversity in Toronto, Canada, by approaching the religious food practices of the members of two groups, Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs and Noor Islamic Cultural Centre, who are both involved in Toronto's food movement. Both groups have developed food programming as a mode of religious engagement within the respective organizations specifically, as well as in the larger community. In attending to the religious food acts of my interlocutors at both organizations, I am able to show the ways that both communities use food to think about value and values, and to develop relationships with themselves, each other (including non-human others), the land, and the wider community. Pursuing a comparative study has also allowed me to perceive the particularities of each set of practices in sharper relief. My goal in undertaking this research program is to discover what role food plays in the religious lives of the people in these communities, how religion can mediate food choices, and how food can, in turn, mediate religion.

From October 2012 to November 2013, I conducted field research with participants from Noor and Shoresh. This research consisted of a combination of field techniques, mainly participant-observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviewing. The interviews were structured around a set of questions about food and religious life (the same set of questions were used for both groups, with certain key words interchanged, e.g. *kosher* and *halal*), and my interlocutors reflected on the relationship between food and religion in their own lives including religious festivities, memories from family life, and purchasing preferences. Participant observation gave me access to a dimension of activity rather than of narrative, and I was able to join my interlocutors in religious services, fasts, celebratory meals, ordinary commensality, and numerous other food-related events including lectures, workshops, conferences, text studies, agricultural activities, cooking classes, and charitable meal deliveries.

During my year of field research, I saw the deep engagement of my interlocutors. Their food-related activities are diverse, and include text studies, food charity, fasting, feasting, fundraising, dieting, teaching, farming, and business ventures. I now turn to the economic, environmental, ethical, and social content of these food practices, in order to

better understand the uses to which food is put. I hope that my analysis will contribute to our understanding of the shape and impacts of religious diversity in a pluralist context.

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