

Review of:

The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice

Christopher Carter. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021. Pp. 208, notes, index.

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The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Food, and Food Justice provides a decolonial analysis of Black foodways that imagines an understanding of food justice grounded in an ethics of radical Christian compassion. Christopher Carter, an Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego, connects the history of Black foodways to food justice and suggests (Black) Christians endeavor toward a more just food system that benefits Black folk. Carter explains that for Black people, soul food is an expression of identity; it's how we learn about who we are and where we have been.

As a Black Christian and Communication scholar who critically studies food, I was especially intrigued by Carter's arguments. Though racism and colonialism have sought to erase identity, our foodways have resisted and survived those oppressions and continue to serve as mementos of our survival. However, the development of US Food policy, and thus the food system, has historically been harmful to people of color. Carter argues that Black folk must continue to find ways to ensure the survival of our culture, history, and people. In order to meet that need, he proposes a "reimagination of Black foodways" that centers the radical compassion of Jesus Christ (x). Carter believes that compassion, loving God, and loving one's neighbor are essential to creating a more just food system that privileges all people, not just white people. This book proposes a "decolonial theological anthropology" or "theoethical way of being human that resists the dehumanizing logic of Enlightenment colonial thinking" as a basis for reimagining soul food (xi). Carter's work engages three theologically grounded eating practices that address food injustice: seeking justice for food workers, caring for the earth, and "soulfull eating," a term that Carter coined to address a practice of Black veganism that decolonizes soul food and delinks it from coloniality (13).

Intended as a resource to decolonize Black foodways and combat structural racism and food injustice, Carter explicitly chooses to direct this book toward Black Christians (11). Because Carter has defined his intended audience so directly, his readers must view the work with the understanding that it is, at its core, a book of directives that, depending on the identity of the reader, may vary in applicability. However, there are elements to the book and what it explores that are interesting for a variety of readers to consider.

Diverting from traditional historical lenses, this book features a historical overview of Black foodways and the food system that weaves in Carter's personal narratives and experiences; it is both theory and praxis, incorporating a theological grounding and spiritual formation while providing actionable steps to execute Black veganism. The book centers on soul food, which Carter believes emerged as "an antiracist response to anti-Black racism" (2). Thus, he argues, a reclamation of soul food today must consider the problems of how the current food system (re: industrial agriculture and factory farming) marginalizes people of color. Each chapter ends with the vegan soul food recipes that

Carter uses to feed and educate his community about soulful eating and food justice (ex: red beans and rice, collard greens, gumbo, cornbread, watermelon, and peach crisp).

Taking these systems of oppression into account, Carter proposes Black veganism as the solution because it enables a practice of Christian social justice that also contributes to food sovereignty for Black folk. Food justice alone addresses a food system's inequities that negatively impact Black people; however, when Black Christians reimagine soul food or eating in a way that is more consistent with theological and social values, it ensures the preservation and survival of Black folk. For Carter, soulful eating is a proactive practice that demonstrates care for the earth and food workers rather than simply reactively attempting to mitigate the effects of food injustice. An essential part of that proactivity is the claim to Black veganism. Carter argues that not eating meat reclaims the racist hierarchical anthropocentrism that once viewed Blacks as not human or as animals. Carter argues that Black veganism is a decolonizing project that unlinks Black bodies from this racist view and helps to express compassion for God's creations.

The book finds its progression by exploring the topic through the four movements of epistemology: knowing, thinking, being, and doing. Chapter One, "Transatlantic Soul" (knowing), looks at a historical overview of Black foodways in the context of colonialism. The chapter traces the culinary contributions of Black folk and explores how soul food has evolved from food practices in Africa, on plantations, during the Great Migration, and continues to shift in the present moment. Chapter Two, "Food Pyramid Scheme" (thinking), focuses on the political economy of food as it relates to the exploitation of labor in the food system and the environmental racism of food policies. Chapter Three, "Being Human as Praxis" (being), shows how white Christianity has justified the oppression of Black bodies and thus sets up the theoretical framework for Black Christians to pursue a social justice praxis centered on food. Chapter 4, "Tasting Freedom" (doing), proposes the theologically grounded eating practices that respond to food injustice and reimagine a soul food that is socially, politically, and spiritually liberating.

The Spirit of Soul Food has a few particular strengths that merit reflection. One of the most salient strengths is the text's well-researched and accessibly written quality. Because of its approachability, the book would be a useful resource for teaching undergraduates about structural racism in the food system (124). Carter clearly and succinctly explains complicated concepts such as racism, neoliberal political systems, coloniality, white supremacy, and decolonization through the lens of Black foodways. Chapters one or two are particularly appropriate for students in the interdisciplinary fields of Communication, Food Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Black Studies. It could also be a valuable book to include on a Theology syllabus. The theoretical components of the book are sound, and the praxis components would provoke much debate among students, especially the solution of Black veganism to problems of racism and injustice. The book represents a productive decolonial project that posits a reimagination of soul food and asks the reader to consider how we can improvise "traditional" recipes to fit today's broken food system. In addition, it might make for an exciting assignment for students to test out the recipes and put Black veganism into practice. For example, the collard greens recipe calls for raisins and orange juice, which is likely unfamiliar to most people who cook or consume soul food.

The novel focus of the book could generate a lively discussion about the feasibility and practicality of vegan soul food in Black communities.

While veganism is undoubtedly one way to better care for animals and the earth, it is certainly not the only solution to racism and food injustice. However, this often-overlooked aspect of the study of Black foodways provides a valuable addition to our understanding of soul food, veganism, food ethics, and restorative justice. The Christian lens of compassion is certainly an unconventional approach to address structural racism and the significance of Black culinary history but is a significant call for Black Christians (and anyone else) to progress towards anti-oppressive liberation for humans, nonhumans, and the earth.