

Center for Canon Law 1st Annual Lecture

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*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,
but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles (Mat. 15:11).*

So why do (some) Jews observe Kosher?

Abstract:

The Kosher rules which some Jews still observe seem to represent the epitome of senseless religious legalisms: They appear arbitrary (pig no, cow yes? Cod yes, Sturgeon no?), alienating (Sorry, I can't eat this. But it's wonderful! Yes, but not Kosher) and hopelessly irrational. They confirm a widely held view (though in these times not publicly expressed since politically incorrect) that Judaism is an earlier and primitive form of religiosity – indeed an inferior religion.

It is true that all attempts to find a rational justification for this rule or that are doomed to failure. But, as will be argued in this lecture, these very attempts negate the deep spiritual and religious significance.

Seen alongside the two other principal clusters of ritual law – Sabbath observance (what? you cannot even switch on a light – or your computer...? Or Cook? Or use a car) and the ritualistic rule of sexual relations (12 days of abstinence a month, even within marriage – what's that about?!), this view of pointless legalisms is further deepened.

The lecture will first remind us that the ritual laws live side by side with the moral law: Love Thy Neighbor like Yourself (found in Leviticus 18) is followed immediately by Do not mix wool and linen in your clothing. It is this very combination of the moral and the ritual which chart the Jewish path to holiness. Both, the moral and the ritual, are equally the living word of God.

If one focusses on the ritual part, I will argue that it introduces a permanent, quotidian presence of God's word into the minutiae of daily life; that its very

apparent transcendent incomprehensiveness delivers one from the anthropocentric logic of Kantian human hubris (why do you do it? It makes no sense! Yes, but it is God's will) and replaces it with a theocentric *Weltanschauung*. Finally it is a form of liberty. By submitting to the transcendent, and being 'slave' only to the Almighty, one is liberated from slavery to our human desires -- I cannot eat anything that my heart desires (kosher rules), I cannot have sex as often as I desire (sexual ritual rules) and our biggest form of human slavery -- to career, material goods, and other forms of human ambition (Sabbath rules -- our human week has six, not seven days, one day is the Lord's).

It is, of course, not the only path to holiness, but it is, one may think, a particular form of testimony, all the more important in a secularized world, of one possible meaning of being *Homo Religiosus*.

Maybe these arcane 'legalistic' rules (always alongside the ethical norms) do make some sense after all. It should not surprise us -- considering their author, the Holy One Blessed be He.