Deifying Diet: The Slow Food Movement as an Emergent Religion

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Deifying Diet:
The Slow Food Movement as an Emergent Religion

Maureen Whitehouse

A Thesis in the Field of Religion
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the food movement, in particular the incipient Slow Food movement, and puts forth that the creation and development of this trend exhibits many characteristics of an emerging religion and has arguably begun to function as such. Since the early 1990s, many critics have claimed that the dominance of malbouffe (bad food) has resulted in numerous negative consequences. The Slow Food movement emerged as an answer to the public’s growing concern and desire to address this problem. Today a sizable number of people across the globe are embracing the Slow Food movement with the same fervor typically seen in adherents of a conventional religion. Its many ardent devotees choose a way of life that is substantially different from that of the mainstream, reciting the mantra “Good, Clean and Fair.” Among their strongest-held principles is the belief that the Slow Food ethos presents a viable path to liberation of mind, body, and spirit. This study first espouses a definition of religion that is broad-reaching in approach, drawing from academic investigations by scholars such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ernst Troeltsch, Clifford Geertz, Paul Tillich, and Peter Berger. Upon this foundation, this study approaches the Slow Food movement as embodying numerous elements of a religion using Robert S. Ellwood’s description of the four important features that characterize an “emergent religion.” First, it appears at a time of uncertainty; second, tradition becomes “new” by taking on some new focus making it unique; third, it involves a charismatic leader who is central in the development of the religion; and fourth, it emphasizes the future—looking ahead to better times (Ellwood 133-134). In examining how this four-fold process has played out during the establishment and extension of the
Slow Food movement, this study will illustrate how followers are being attracted and mobilized towards establishing a solid collective identity that fosters the movement’s progress. In addition, to underscore this study’s significance, I will conclude by highlighting the multiple ways that the food movement, in particular the Slow Food movement, is infiltrating traditional religions across a broad and varied spectrum of faiths.
Frontispiece

(Boseveld)
Author’s Biographical Sketch

Maureen Whitehouse is an expert in eco-spiritual nutrition and the award-winning, bestselling author of three books on nutrition and spirituality: *Soul-Full Eating: A (Delicious!) Path to Higher Consciousness* (2007), which won the IPPY and Nautilus Book Awards and became a #1 international best-selling title; *Food: A Love Story* (2013); and *Mind, Body, Spirit Cleanse* (2016). In each of these books, Maureen artfully employs her expert knowledge, which grew from decades of voraciously studying the world’s diverse nutritional and spiritual traditions, to address an appealing and often obsessive topic—the way we eat.

A passionate teacher as well as a seasoned media professional, Maureen graduated from the *University of Rhode Island* where she received her BA in Secondary Education and General Science. When Maureen isn’t coaching personal clients or doing research on food ethos, she travels the world extensively, leads groups on *Miracle Journeys* to sacred places, and shares her message of the interconnection between food and spirituality. In her words, she leads a charmed life.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my brilliant daughters, Merete and Maeve, who are each sure to make a notable and lasting mark on the world. And to my mother, Barbara Yodice Whitehouse, who in her lifetime loved and respected all things Harvard (possibly to a fault!). I’m certain she now looks down from above upon this culmination of my very own joyous time spent at Harvard with nearly the same awe and delight that she currently looks upon the Divine. Couldn’t have done it without you Mom!
Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank Stephen Shoemaker, who possesses a rare talent for intertwining serious scholarship with quick-witted joviality. You are not only a brilliant educator, but a thoughtful, enthusiastic thesis advisor. You’ve shown me a generous side of academics I would never have known existed, along with an altogether newfound capacity to create a valid, valuable argument.

Secondly, even after relentlessly honing my skills as a wordsmith through this thesis, it is difficult to adequately convey my gratitude to Cheryl Giles. You are a remarkable human being. I feel I stumbled upon true gold when I met you. You embody so authentically a brand of humble genius and compassion that is ever on the lookout for inspiring ways to help and care for others and advance humankind. Your big-heartedness, generosity, warm-spirited brilliance as a teacher, mentor, and thesis director during this project has been stellar.

And finally, I’d like to express my appreciation to Chuck Houston for his receptivity and ever-available guidance as an academic advisor along the way. You make the Harvard journey not only navigable and approachable, but you add a sense of light-heartedness and encouragement just when it’s needed most.

Thank you all, with all of my heart.
Table of Contents

Frontispiece .............................................................................................................................. v
Author’s Biographical Sketch ................................................................................................. vi
Dedication ................................................................................................................................. vii
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. viii
Chapter I Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
   Food and Religion .................................................................................................................. 1
   A Unique Approach to Religious Studies: Slow Food Through the Lens of Religion .......... 2
   Today’s Food Movement in Context .................................................................................... 4
   The Rise of Slow Food (As a Major Player in the Food Movement) .................................... 7
   The Slow Food Movement as an Emergent Religion ......................................................... 8
   The Food Movement Infiltrating Traditional Religion ....................................................... 10
   Methodology ......................................................................................................................... 10
Chapter II Defining Religion ................................................................................................... 12
   Emile Durkheim ...................................................................................................................... 14
   Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch ............................................................................................ 15
   Clifford Geertz ....................................................................................................................... 17
   Peter Berger ........................................................................................................................... 18
   Paul Tillich .............................................................................................................................. 20
Chapter III Slow Food as an Emergent Religion

Slowly (but Surely) A Nascent Religion Emerges

1. An Emergent Religion Appears at a Time of Uncertainty

2. In An Emergent Religion, Tradition Becomes “New” by Taking on Some New Focus, Making it Unique

3. An Emergent Religion Involves a Charismatic Leader who is Central in the Development of the Religion

4. An Emergent Religion Emphasizes the Future—Looking Ahead to Better Times

Chapter IV Slow Food Infiltrates Traditional Religion

Chapter V Summary and Conclusion

Bibliography
Chapter I
Introduction

Food and Religion

Though there is much that divides and separates humankind, there is one undeniable, universal commonality—everyone eats. Far from being simply a biological requirement, food provides not just sustenance and nourishment, but comfort, pleasure, cultural identity and multitudinous outlets for creativity. Beyond these, humankind has a tendency to imbue the foods they eat or do not eat with profound and compelling values. Such ideals align it with “something more” that reaches beyond physical satiation to making meaning. In other words, food serves as both material substance and a sacred symbol to nourish body and soul, and as such it has been an important fixture in religious traditions since recorded time.

Even the most cursory reflection on the history of religion reveals that food has played an essential role to both informal and formal doctrines across all faiths. This undeniable link between nourishment and nirvana has often manifested symbolically, from food sacrifices offered to appease and please the gods, to Eve’s first bite of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Significant meaning has also been continually ascribed to food through practices such as with kosher and halal codes in Judaism and Islam, or in the rituals of Christian communion and Hindu prasad. In religious communities across the globe, adherents have indulged in and abstained from, celebrated
and shunned specific foods in order to obey ethical mandates, attain physical and spiritual wellbeing, and observe the traditions of both their faith and ethnic identity. Food has been used to incite mystical experiences, reinforce laws and mark specialness. Also, religious individuals and groups have used food to effect change in society and culture, and to create or sustain distinct communities. Be it through feasting or fasting, adherents throughout time have regarded food as a vehicle to symbolically, and sometimes tangibly, connect with their deities, their holy elect and with one another.

These practices are by no means a thing of the past as food and eating remain unquestionably at the heart and soul of religious life today. This thesis will highlight a myriad of complex and fascinating ways in which food and religion intersect, and, more importantly, it will go beyond these undeniable parallels to pose a more provocative question concerning the current food movement, and its arguable status as an emergent religion.

A Unique Approach to Religious Studies: Slow Food Through the Lens of Religion

By looking at the current food movement—or, more specifically, the Slow Food movement as a microcosmic example of the whole—through the lens of a religion, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the enduring relationship between food consumption and humanity’s search for meaning in life. In fact, through this close study, it becomes apparent that the role of food as a strong means by which individuals share and live in alignment with firmly held beliefs has grown exponentially in recent years. Especially in the reverential attitude of Slow Food adherents toward food, treating it as a sacred expression of their deeper values in much the same way that religions have done
for millennia. Upon recognizing this surprising religiosity in a movement that consistently asserts and adheres to its own non-religious nature, this study was initiated to discern if more parallels exist. This thesis reveals not only confirmation of the continuing role food plays in humankind’s search for meaning, but also that the Slow Food movement—which arguably grew out of that search, and is rapidly gaining traction in today’s world because of it—has in fact exhibited all of the characteristics of an emergent religion. The analysis to follow presents in detail the evidence that I have identified to support this claim, focusing on the Slow Food movement as a more specific and easily quantifiable sub-sector that is emblematic of the food movement at large.

This study begins by first investigating various scholarly definitions of religion, to establish what constitutes a “religion.” It draws upon an array of academic theories for this purpose, including those of Emile Durkheim, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz and Paul Tillich. Building upon that foundation, this analysis approaches the Slow Food movement as embodying the four important characteristics of an “emergent religion” as described in the work of Robert S. Ellwood:

1. It appears at a time of uncertainty.
2. Tradition becomes “new” by taking on some new focus making it unique.
3. It involves a charismatic leader who is central in the development of the religion.
4. It emphasizes the future—looking ahead to better times.

In examining how these elements have played out in the emergence, establishment and extension of the Slow Food movement, this thesis illustrates how
followers are attracted and mobilized towards establishing a solid collective identity that fosters the movement’s progress. Thus, from an academic perspective, Slow Food can be viewed as filling the role of traditional religion in a growing number of people’s lives.

**Today’s Food Movement in Context**

The cultural stage for such a “religion” was set in the early 20th century as corporate farming took hold. Along with the trend toward factory farming came an expansion in multinational food corporations, increasing the size of not only farms but also processing facilities and the overall food system. These large-scale producers and distributors, including fast food restaurant chains, are often seen by food activists as the cause of poorly managed practices that contribute to many of the world’s ills, such as heavy subsidies, globalization, pollution, poor animal welfare, unsafe and unfit working conditions, urban sprawl and degradation of the air, soil and water (Pollan, “Food Movement Rising”).

The food movement emerged to counter this epidemic fraught with what some say is a general insensitivity to the health and wellbeing of the world’s population and lack of care for the world economy and environment (Walsh). In sum, it is a movement centered around the world’s citizens collectively declaring their rights to food security. It emphasizes sound, nutritious food of the highest quality, which is produced, processed, distributed and consumed in sustainable ways. The anticipated outcome of this approach is the restored environmental, social and economic health of the earth as well as of the farmers, livestock and consumers that rely on it.
In recent years, this ethos has taken hold socially and cross-culturally. As writer Jonathan Lantham puts it, “whereas not so very long ago food, and even more so agriculture, were painfully unfashionable subjects, all of a sudden, individuals all over the globe have developed an often passionate interest in the products and processes of the food system” (Lantham). Those in support of the food movement perceive its importance and impact to be significant because every day, everywhere, everyone eats. Therefore, even the smallest change in the way food is produced, marketed and/or consumed can be seen to have a significant effect on the health and wellbeing of both the individual and the environment as a whole. Activists in the movement claim food choices favoring food security—such as farmer’s markets, community gardens, CSAs (community supported agriculture), food co-ops, traditional and artisan food preparation, and mindful consumption—improve the ecosystem, local economies and the individual’s quality of life. They see this as affecting not only the way we grow, prepare, process and consume food, but our consciousness and culture at large, as well as our food-related rituals.

Comprising today’s food movement is a near-dizzying array of approaches to growing, preparing and eating food that includes diverse methodologies from farmers, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, activists and consumers to name a few. According to New York Times writer, Michael Pollan, these various voices are coming together in a coherent social movement. He states, “The food movement coalesces around the recognition that today’s food and farming economy is ‘unsustainable’—that it can’t go on in its current form much longer without courting a breakdown of some kind, whether environmental, economic, or both” (“Food Movement Rising”). Pollan adds, “Put another way, the food movement has set out to foster new forms of civil society. But instead of
proposing that space as a counterweight to an overbearing state, as is usually the case, the food movement poses it against the dominance of corporations and their tendency to insinuate themselves into any aspect of our lives from which they can profit” (“Food Movement Rising”). Indeed, according to Pew research, a majority (57%) of Americans see the food industry as “big business” and do not trust information coming from food industry leaders. Nearly seven-in-ten of this group (68%) say they follow news reports somewhat to very closely about genetically modified foods and other related topics that may affect their own personal health and the health of the planet. It appears the general population is becoming more and more conscious of the unique symbiosis between the state of the environment and our own individual wellbeing (Kennedy).

This awareness is what has propelled the food movement, changing the way people choose to eat and how they treat the plants, animals and land responsible for supplying the world’s provisions. In a recent article, Time Magazine’s Bryan Walsh affirms that the rise of the food movement is “not only changing the way Americans eat and the way they farm—away from industrialized, cheap calories and toward more organic, small-scale production, with plenty of fruits and vegetables—but also, altering the way they work and relate to one another. To its most ardent adherents, the food movement is not just about reform—it is about revolution” (“Foodies Can Eclipse”). There are many avenues of advocacy within the movement, including support of organic and locally produced food, school lunch reform, animal rights and welfare, the campaign against genetically modified crops, efforts to combat obesity, farm bill reform, food safety regulation, efforts to promote urban agriculture and the regulation of food ingredients and marketing, especially to children.
When considering the many sub-sects of the food movement at large, there is none more distinct and cohesive than Slow Food. Slow Food began in 1986 as a gastronomic organization of 62 fervent food lovers led by former political activist Carlo Petrini in Bra, Italy. Its initial mission was to counter the opening of a McDonald’s fast food restaurant near the Spanish Steps in Rome. Since then, it has swelled to an international movement of more than 100,000 enthusiasts with its own set of distinct ideologies addressing far more than the ills of fast food. At the heart of Slow Food is the vision to promote local foods and traditional gastronomy, meaning resistance to industrial food production and universal homogeny in all its manifestations. Slow Food writer and English translator to Petrini, Corby Kummer, writes, “The Slow Food movement stands in direct opposition to everything that a fast food meal represents: blandness, uniformity, conformity, the blind worship of science and technology” (10). These, among other things, are argued to be unfavorable to both consumers and producers as they lead to the unhealthy and demeaning standardization of production, which marginalizes and threatens to destroy that which is locally unique. Kummer continues, “If fast food is the culinary equivalent of a sound bite, then Slow Food is an honest, thorough declaration of intent. Many tastes are better than one, this new movement says” (10).

Slow Food’s stated mission is to protect biodiversity in the world's food supply, educate the population about “Good, Clean and Fair” food and connect members through world-wide regional events. As Slow Food chef and food activist Alice Waters writes in her foreword in Petrini’s book, Slow Food Nation, “[Carlo Petrini] argues that, at every
level, our food supply must meet the three criteria of quality, purity and justice; it should be *good*, and tasty to eat; it should be *clean*, produced in ways that are humane and environmentally sound; and the system by which our food is provided must be economically and socially *fair* to all who labor in it. Carlo’s great insight is that when we seek out food that meets these criteria, we are no longer mere consumers but *co-producers*, who are bearing our fair share of the costs of producing good food and creating responsible communities” (x). In this spirit, the organization urges its followers to literally slow down and find enjoyment in the selection, preparation and consumption of food to cultivate a discerning palate and a taste for distinctive products, which in turn supports those who produce such provisions and combats the further homogenization of the world.

**The Slow Food Movement as an Emergent Religion**

The Slow Food movement was chosen for this study specifically because it aptly and accurately represents the grand scheme of the entire food movement, albeit in a way that is more contained and quantifiable and so better suited to detailed analysis. Additionally, Slow Food stands out as having many characteristics of an emergent religion—perhaps more so than any other sub-sect of the food movement—and this paper argues that it has begun to function as such.

Today, converts are embracing the Slow Food movement with the same fervor and conviction typically seen in adherents of a conventional religion. Its many ardent devotees choose a way of life that is substantially different from that of most of the
mainstream population, and among their strongest-held principles is the belief that the Slow Food ethos presents a viable path to liberation of mind, body and even spirit via food. These key characteristics set the stage for this proposition that the movement exhibits a proclivity in today’s popular culture towards becoming a new kind of secular faith. Throughout this thesis, these and numerous other parallels will be taken into consideration, as well as noted scholarly perspectives such as Ellwood’s four characteristics of an emergent religion.

In this new Slow Food “faith”, the celebrity chef is the high priest. Organic, fair-trade, locally grown, artisan-cured repast is communion. The chosen altar to worship upon is the microbrewery high top or farm-to-table buffet. While the masses chase after “miracle” foods, cookbooks have become bibles. The typical markers of religious devotion—passion, zealotry, conviction, proselytizing, and even a bit of self-righteousness—are certain traits found among today’s impassioned food lovers. Additionally, recent studies show that, as sociologist Max Weber asserted back in the early 1900s, mainline institutional religion no longer draws the attention it once did in the dominant culture. Perhaps this leaves ample room for a new parainstitutional religiousness in the form of the burgeoning food movement, specifically in the Slow Food subculture. In fact, according to Pew statistics, the food movement is indeed taking hold and enlisting large numbers of adherents at just the same time that mainstream church attendance is on the decline (2014 Religious Landscape Pew 2015 &America’s Changing Religious Landscape Pew 2016).
The Food Movement Infiltrating Traditional Religion

Underscoring the broader significance of the topic at hand, this thesis will conclude by highlighting the ways in which traditional religions across a wide and diverse spectrum of faiths are adopting various aspects of the food movement, most particularly Slow Food, in order to appeal to new congregants. There is a current trend whereby people who already subscribe to a certain religion are looking to the food movement to satisfy their craving for even greater connectivity, purpose and a deeper sense of meaning. This is evidenced by the growing numbers flocking to be part of the food-oriented missions within congregations of all faiths. In response, religious establishments are increasingly incorporating food into traditional forms of worship.

Methodology

The research methods employed in this thesis are a hybrid of monographs, scholarly debates and treatises primarily in the realm of the sociology of religion. Statistical research was consulted, such as that used by the Pew Research Center, to glean current, pertinent statistics and trends among people with regard to both formalized religion and the modern-day food movement. The main argument will be informed by primary and secondary sources, including interviews, scholarly articles, periodicals, first-hand accounts and observations, which attest to the fact that the Slow Food movement exhibits all of Ellwood’s characteristics inherent in an emergent religion.
In sum, this thesis investigates the increasingly prominent food movement in the United States and abroad through the lens of one small but significant aspect of it—the Slow Food subculture. This thesis does not intend to exaggerate the Slow Food movement’s religious role, but rather to utilize proper theoretical evidence in exploration of its possible religious dimensions, and to illustrate how the movement can be viewed, given these distinct characteristics, as an emergent religion of its own. This not only has implications for the future relationship between food and faith, or the future of the food movement, but it also sheds light on a very effective way of studying the emergence of religions: from within an objective framework. In fact, one might arguably learn more about the sociology of religion from within this objective framework than could be gleaned by studying the emergence of a more traditionally oriented nascent faith. The resulting analysis will therefore, hopefully, make its own contribution to the study of the sociology of religion, speaking to how mankind’s search for deeper fulfillment can legitimately manifest and be fulfilled in a fascinating myriad of ways.
In order to provide an overview of how the Slow Food movement has begun to emerge as a popular religion, it is necessary to first establish a comprehensive definition of religion, which will be used as the foundation of the argument to follow. Yet, because religion crosses so many different boundaries in the human experience, it has proven extremely difficult to formulate a definition that commands wide assent. Many notable academics have asserted the presence of religion as a cultural universal, (Mazur & McCarthy xvii) but while its cultural significance is well established, there remains a great disparity among scholars as to what religion actually is. Some define religion as an experience, using words like “sacred” or “transcendent”. Others focus on social transformation or the creation of sub-cultures rather than just individual experience. In the latter view, religion can be seen as an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems and worldviews that relate humanity to an order of existence.

Rather than limiting this discussion of religion to isolated institutional forms, this examination of the Slow Food movement as a religion focuses on a more wide-reaching definitional strategy. This specific approach, typically adopted by theologians and other religiously-oriented scholars, explains religion from a social science perspective and uses tools and methodologies of sociology to understand the societal forces and influences that shape it. At its core, the sociology of religion does not set out to assess the validity of
religious beliefs, but instead acknowledges that humans are social by nature and seeks to comprehend the role religion plays for individuals as they simultaneously live out their stated convictions to social forces and the influences present within various group dynamics.

The process of studying multiple dogmas from this perspective may require what renowned social scientist Peter L. Berger has described as inherent “methodological atheism” (100). Such an approach is considered to be helpful in maintaining objectivity while lending the proper breadth of scope to this thesis. Exemplary in this school of thought are two “truly great figures” in the sociology of religion, Emile Durkheim and his contemporary, Max Weber, who both distanced themselves from the “normative claims made by the religions and societies they studied” to offer a systematic approach to defining religion (Eliade, Encyclopedia of Religion 8493). While Weber emphasized the relationship between religion and the economic or social structure of society, arguing its inevitable decline, Durkheim focused not on the demise of religion but on its transformation, analyzing the role played by religion in the collective consciousness of society. Each of these perspectives, in addition to the contribution of works by Ernst Troeltsch, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger and Paul Tillich, are extremely useful to this argument, and in conjunction, will provide a thorough foundation for the analysis of the Slow Food movement as a religion in its own right. A brief description of the relevant theories of these prominent academics within the scholarship of the sociology of religion will now follow.
Emile Durkheim

Once labeled a “theologian of civil religion”, Durkheim called the religion of modern societies the “cult of the individual.” (Eliade, Encyclopedia of Religion 8493). Durkheim stated that, in order to arrive at an accurate definition of religion, “it is necessary to begin by freeing the mind of every preconceived idea” and then “consider the ways in which it presents among the most civilized peoples” (Elementary Religious Life 21). Based on the premise that there are no false religions, divinity for Durkheim was no more than “society transfigured and symbolically expressed” (Elementary Religious Life 21). He argued that religion is a social creation—“society divinized”—that occurs when men come together to celebrate “sacred things” and unwittingly celebrate the power of their society (On Religion 123).

Durkheim ends the first chapter of his book, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, with this definition of religion: “Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Elementary Religious Life 62). His emphasis on religion as less an indivisible whole than a complex system of parts united by “sacred” beliefs and practices lends itself quite aptly to the study of the Slow Food movement as an emergent religion. This is most especially due to his categorization of religion into beliefs (collective representations) and rites (determined modes of action).

Durkheim asserted that because rites can be distinguished from other actions only by their object, and the nature of that object is determined by beliefs, the latter should be determined first. He observed that, “All known religious beliefs present one common
characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, which can be classified by two opposed groups—the sacred and the profane” (Elementary Religious Life52). This notion of the sacred and profane is clearly evident in Slow Food rhetoric, which repeatedly juxtaposes its own mission against the “profane” fast food agenda that Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini says, “has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes.” In his 1989 Manifesto, Petrini wrote, “Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food” (Case for Taste xxiii-xxiv). To fulfill this goal, Slow Food advocates treat both food and their overall mission as sacred, particularly via the ritual of slowly savoring wholesome, hand-crafted meals intentionally made with attention to detail and care. Speaking to the sacred act of eating as it is viewed and experienced by those committed to living the Slow Food ethos, columnist Jonathon Engels writes in an article about Slow Food and Slow Travel, “Enjoying a meal is more than mere sustenance, it’s not just about flavors to be consumed as fuel, but [it involves] atmosphere, communion, connection, tradition and ritual, with notes of subtlety that enrich the very fiber (quite literally) of our being. Food is life”(Engels).

Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch

Durkheim’s contemporaries, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch brought to light dimensions of religion that are very relevant to this study. Weber believed that “[religions’] psychological response to social conflict” and their “compromises with social constraints” showed how they “generated entire systems of value and belief, as
well as how they gave institutional structure and cultural content to civilizations” (Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 9712). This is certainly true of the Slow Food movement, which emerged at a time of social conflict to contend with the constraints presented by the industrialized food system’s growing commercial interest in Italy in the 1980s. In 1986, it was revealed that a McDonalds restaurant was slated to open on the Spanish Steps in Rome, and as Corby Kummer puts it, “Many Italians were disturbed by the invasion and wanted to wage immediate war” (12). The movement was fueled by what local activists saw as a great need to defend the universal “right to pleasure” which was being threatened as the pace of life accelerated and foodstuffs became increasingly standardized. Thus, their collective response to these social constraints was to intentionally develop and foster an even greater regard for food—an attitude that would inform their entire system of values for decades to come.

Adding to Weber’s theory, Troeltsch saw religion as a “continuous dialect between movements and institutions that are willing to compromise with the world, and ones that refuse to do so” (Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 8494). Troeltsch illustrated the ways in which sects and forms of mysticism emerge out of conflicts within church structures over reappropriation of the common religious traditions and civilization. Under Weber’s influence, he distinguished between church, sect, and mysticism as primary types of religious life (Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 8494). The Slow Food movement distinguishes itself from the food movement at large with its impassioned unwillingness to compromise with the mainstream fast food lifestyle, as well as its alternative approach via the pleasure of slowly savoring meals. In his book, *The Pleasures of Slow Food*, Kummer explains, “[The Slow Food movement] combines urgent issues like protecting
the environment and cataloging and preserving indigenous crops with ways to enjoy foods and traditions that are disappearing with the speed at which McDonalds opens new restaurants. It is fiercely dedicated to maintaining biodiversity. Unlike other environmental groups, however, Slow Food tells members to prepare for suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment… If you have a good time while you eat, the movement argues, you’ll have better meals” (18). With this focus, Slow Food is effectively forming its own “sect” of consumers who believe that a deliberate, congenial relationship with food and its purveyors, centered on pleasure, can afford a more profound—even reverential—experience of life.

Clifford Geertz

Another influential figure in the social-science approach to religion is Clifford Geertz, whose definition of religion aspires to identify religions as a sub-class of cultures. He suggested that each individual and group may have a religion even if they do not believe in a god or the afterlife, or have any of the other more familiar characteristics of an organized religion. This definition asserts that all individuals within a group have a religion because every group has an overall framework that members share in common, which guides their behaviors and allows them to make sense of life. In his essay in The Interpretation of Cultures, Geertz wrote, “the drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs” (140). Very much in alignment with this theory, Slow Food adherents have dedicated themselves to a cohesive framework that not only informs their attitude toward
food consumption but also to life on the whole. Procuring, preparing and consuming food in ways that they believe foster fundamental wellbeing feeds their need for a deeper meaning and purpose. Richard McCarthy, Executive Director of Slow Food USA, said in a recent interview, “It’s not just that we’re consuming vitamin A, vitamin B and so forth, but the relationship to our food matters” (Downs). This approach reflects the Slow Food belief in the enriching quality of food that extends beyond biological needs to approach emotional, intellectual and indeed spiritual satisfaction.

Peter Berger

The work of Durkheim, Weber and Geertz all influenced the work of Peter Berger, who is responsible for introducing phenomenology into religious studies. Berger’s work has been at the forefront of an increased interest in the most modern influences on religious society since the late 1960s. In his classic book, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, Berger discusses a religious transference in which a weakening of more traditional religious communities has given rise to a new model where religion exists in increasingly secular ways (25). As this interpretation of religion considers how a religious vision forms in order to legitimize an alternative “nomos” that orders human existence, it is particularly applicable to the Slow Food movement. According to Berger, this nomos provides symbols charged with “sacred” significance as well as the social structures that satisfy the human craving for meaning. The recurring symbol of “Good, Clean and Fair” food—so central to the movement that it serves as Slow Food’s slogan—is quite exemplary of Berger’s theory.
So too are the social structures built around Slow Food’s defining modality of slow, thoughtful conviviality which proposes to add another, more meaningful dimension of connectivity to mealtime. The term “conviviality” as it is used by the Slow Food movement means taking pleasure in the entire process of procuring, preparing and eating food. This most especially translates into shared mealtime. To offer adherents ample opportunity to gather and support one another in this, regional Slow Food chapters called “conviviums” are formed which expand the global community through tastings, workshops and social opportunities. Each convivium has a regional leader who promotes local farmers, artisans and events that celebrate the pleasures of slow eating and prioritize wholesome living (slowfood.com).

In much the same way that Durkheim’s definition of religion referred to the delineation between the sacred and profane, Berger’s theory describes the function of alternative religious visions as a means for shielding “against the terror of chaos, disorder and evil”. Again, Slow Food rhetoric often poses the fast food lifestyle as the embodiment of those ills, and presents itself as the surefire antidote. As Petrini puts it in his manifesto, “May [Slow Food] preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency” (Case for Taste xxiii-xxiv). Thus, the founder of Slow Food has called into question the apparent systematic order of fast food, accusing it instead of it being a kind of gloried “frenzy” or chaos. On the subject of “evil”, no better example can be given than a recent article about Slow Food in the Unitarian Universalist Church’s Publication, UU World, which says, “Often viewed as the Satan of the modern fast food world, McDonald's has become the example by which we pace our lives” (Cohen). By comparing Satan, the near-universal symbol of evil, with McDonalds,
arguably the universal symbol of fast food, Slow Food makes its stance exceedingly clear.

Paul Tillich

Affirming and adding to the importance of Berger’s assertions is Paul Tillich’s theory of “ultimate concern.” Tillich states that human beings possess many concerns, only some of which are spiritual in nature. Cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and political concerns are among those that become urgent and are elevated to the level of ultimacy (10). One can, according to Tillich, be ultimately concerned about anything, including one’s personal success, a national sovereignty, a political or social vision, the quest for scientific truth, or God. But to this point Tillich states, “The content of faith, while of infinite importance to the believer, is not significant with respect to its formal definition” (4). Therefore, according to this theory, the importance of Slow Food to its adherents and the ultimate concern that is ignited and sustained within the organization is enough to qualify the movement as an emerging faith. The impassioned words of Petrini, who repeatedly speaks in terms of taking action and spreading the Slow Food mission, are an excellent example of such concern.

In a world that appears ineluctably condemned to the standardization of all products and the flattening out of all flavors, a world whose resources have been harnessed to the interests and profits of a few, Slow Food sees its international vocation as a proposal for an alternative model of development. Concrete actions and feasible projects are more congenial to us than denial and protest. Every corner of the world is guarding a portion of biodiversity that is under threat every day from those who see man and nature merely as riches to be exploited. The first objective is to spread knowledge and enlarge awareness; starting from there, we can give dignity and economic life to every territory, embracing diversity as a thing of
value and the techniques of globalization themselves as a vehicle for enhancing its value and making it known (*Case for Taste* 10).

Motivated by Petrini’s call to action, this global movement now boasts more than 1,000,000 supporters, 100,000 members and 2,400 food communities across 160+ countries. Thus, the organization that began by dedicating itself to “a firm defense of quiet material pleasure,” has lately waded into deeper political and economic waters. Today’s followers are made especially aware that their food choices can rehabilitate and elevate the act of consumption, making it something profoundly progressive—a vehicle for defending and advocating policies that “promote holistic alternatives to the industrial system” (slowfoodusa.org).

Taken together, the aforementioned theories on the sociology of religion illustrate that religious institutions and their doctrines, rules and mandates are never divorced from their cultural influences. Quite the contrary, these scholars have all asserted that religions are a product of the societies they originate from and become embedded in. As opposed to existing in a vacuum, they continually adopt, personalize and reject features of the societal standards in which they are rooted, while acting in response to the inclinations and aspirations of their members. Taking this fundamental dynamism into account, along with the various stances gleaned from Durkheim, Weber, Troeltsch, Geertz, Berger and Tillich, I have amalgamated the following working definition of religion, which will provide the foundation for subsequent analysis of the Slow Food movement as an emergent religion:
Religion is a socially constructed, unified system of beliefs or practices that coalesces when a collective of people seeks to satisfy the universally felt human craving for meaning, especially at a time when societal conflict makes the existing social structure dissatisfactory to that collective. It dedicates itself to the celebration of “sacred” things as a way of making sense of life, however the content of such a faith may be secular as its orientation is not as important as its ability to uphold and celebrate whatever it is the collective deems to be sacred, or of primary importance.
Chapter III
Slow Food as an Emergent Religion

Slowly (but Surely) A Nascent Religion Emerges

Having established a suitable definition of religion that can be aptly applied in the examination of the food movement—most specifically the Slow Food movement—as a religion, it is now possible to embark upon a more in-depth study of the topic by identifying the numerous ways in which the early beginnings and current development of Slow Food mirror an “emergent religion”. In this endeavor, the work of American academic, author and expert on world religions, Robert S. Ellwood will be our guide. Ellwood, also with a firm sociological grounding, provides a clear and compelling description of the four important features that characterize an emergent religion in his work titled *Introducing Religion from Inside and Outside*, all of which align very closely with the story of Slow Food’s inception.

Much like the social scientists who came before him, Ellwood approaches religion as a cultural phenomenon, asserting that “the group legitimates the religious experiences of the individuals in it by incorporating them into a societal perception of reality of the culture in which they live” (127). He states that if we are to consider only established religions in our assessment of religions, it could appear that religious life is rather “static” and tied to “ponderous institution” (127). This is largely due to the way that scholars typically study the same texts “generation after generation” and adherents tend to pass on
identical venerable traditions “age after age” (127). Ellwood’s answer to this is to instead focus on “another side of religion and another manner of religious social experience… [that] leads us into a world of new religious movements” (127). Such movements, as Ellwood describes them, often center around an outstanding person breaking into the “placid waters” of established social structures to propose radical alternatives, “and to make their religion a vehicle for protest on many levels” (127). He states that these movements occur to oppose the dominant pattern, that they are “a whole different way of being religious.” This way is what he calls an emergent religion (127-28). Plainly stated, Ellwood’s characterization of an emergent religion can be summed up in four important features: 1. It appears at a time of uncertainty. 2. Tradition becomes “new” by taking on some new focus making it unique. 3. It involves a charismatic leader who is central in the development of the religion. 4. It emphasizes the future—looking ahead to better times. (133-134) The following four sections will reveal how the development of the Slow Food movement closely follows Ellwood’s model, not only rendering it an emergent religion according to his definition, but also contributing to its current momentum toward becoming a full-fledged faith.

1. An Emergent Religion Appears at a Time of Uncertainty

The birth of Slow Food was initiated in Italy by a small organization of left-wing activists called Arcigola (“Arch Gluttony”), emboldened by the sentiments that many Italians shared at that time who were greatly disturbed by the invasion of fast food culture into their cherished traditional ways. As history proves, this was the perfect time and
climate for the doctrine of Slow Food to materialize. Ellwood states that new religions emerge at times when people feel “their traditional values are being shaken and the future is uncertain” (133). This kind of tension caused by concern for the environment and the common folk feeling marginalized—that their health, welfare and wellbeing has been disregarded by corporate interests and the powers that be—continues to endure not only in Italy but around the world. Today, regardless of geographic location, an atmosphere of uncertainty has prevailed and intensified to reach what some consider to be an all-time high.

Increasing concerns about climate change, the frequency of natural disasters, sociopolitical unrest, and recent trends and downturns in the world’s economy featuring job insecurity, job losses and a shaky recovery post-financial crises, have many people across the globe experiencing extreme instability. With chemical warfare and nuclear threats headlining the news along with controversial elections, Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union, the continuing war in Syria and political ambiguity reigning from the Middle East to Europe to South America and beyond, there is scarcely a corner of the world that is not currently being affected—if not upended—by this prevailing uncertainty. One New York Times article stated that many who “may not be suffering significant economic losses still worry they will, or are simply reacting to pervasive uncertainty” (Belluck). In the United States, an unraveling of family connections due to stress, anxiety, political differences and depression appears to be on the rise. Sarah Bullard Steck, a Washington D.C. therapist who also directs the employee assistance program at the Commerce Department says, “fear of what’s going to happen is having a huge effect on people.” She states that more people are now coming to her with “severe
anxiety” as well as “more marital strife, some domestic violence, and some substance abuse” (Belluck).

To many, the 2016 United States presidential election was a defining event in the contemporary development of worldwide uncertainty. Topping the list of internet search results for “times of uncertainty 2017” are articles like the New York Times’ *As Trump Era Arrives, a Sense of Uncertainty Grips the World*, which highlights the “fury” and “alarm” of world leaders (Erlanger). Other high-ranking articles like Fortune’s *How Corporate America Can Survive These Uncertain Times* (Millstein) and Fox New’s *Trump presidency evokes uncertainty in job-seeking millennials* (Kasperkevic) address concerns about the economy. Still others, such as *Trump’s election threatens human rights around the world* (Washington Post Editorial Board) address the upending of tenable human rights, especially those of women and minorities, and respond to the hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets to march on Washington in protest of what is seen as a “future in question.” *The Future of Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear* (Ball) reports on a heightened fear among Americans of increases in terrorism and situations that may lead to war under the new administration, while *Unease and Uncertainty for Immigrants After Trump’s Travel Ban* (Jenning) and *Trump Uncertainty Slowing U.S. Travel Bookings* (Reuters) highlight the aftermath of President Trump’s first executive orders in office.

According to one article in the Washington Post titled, *Americans are seriously stressed out about the future of the country, survey finds* (Itkowitz), a January, 2017 survey from *The American Psychological Association* revealed that 80 percent of those
polled had symptoms such as tension headaches, feelings of overwhelm or depression. Vaile Wright, a licensed psychologist and member of APA’s *Stress in America* team, stated, “… since the election, stress has increased… And not only did overall stress increase, what we found in January is the highest significant increase in stress in 10 years. That’s stunning. The fact that two-thirds of Americans are saying the future of the nation is causing them stress, it is a startling number” (Itkowitz).

According to Ellwood, this type of enduring, amplified, unpredictable social climate is like fresh tilled soil for the seeds of an emergent religion, most especially when collectives of people feel relatively powerless in such a society. This is precisely when new causes that people can deeply believe in take hold—causes which provide them, “as an elect who are in on a divine secret, with a compensatory even greater power” (133). Now, with large factions of people feeling powerless and misrepresented by their government and government agencies the world over, many are turning to something they do have power over—what and how they eat—as the impetus for change.

In cities like New York, many citizen activists have united around food, both as a cause in and of itself and as a vehicle with which to protest the injustices they perceive in this time of uncertainty. One such group is called *Food First*, a “people’s think tank” and large community of activists who are dedicated to “ending the injustices that cause hunger and helping communities to take back control of their food systems.” Following the 2016 Presidential election, the group published a call to arms on their official website:
Our food systems are vessels of unmatched social and economic power. The implications of this are profound: our food systems are pivotal sites for systemic social, political, and economic transformation...Under a Trump administration, we have a profound opportunity to reflect, and to fight not just for farmers markets, food security, racial equity, or farm justice—but together, for transformation, for an entirely different system built to serve workers, farmers, women, people of color, and more. (www.foodfirst.org)

The Slow Food movement, which has been considered “a perennial bastion” among food advocacy organizations, now appears to be taking a more concerted lead in this trend (Downs). In a podcast episode of USA Today’s Courier Journal titled Slow Food in a Trump World, Executive Director of Slow Food USA, Richard McCarthy, cited Slow Food as a leading, if not the leading, entity in the food movement to address what he referred to as this “period of uncertainty”. In the podcast, McCarthy introduced Slow Food USA as “the American arm of the global food community that is committed to inspiring individuals and communities to change the world through food that is good, that is clean, and that is fair.” He proposed that this approach to eating offers a promising means by which to heal the current climate in America.

We are a divided country... we still have all this baggage of the second half of the 20th century—growth-driven economy, globalization, ultra-specialization—where we don't even have to know where our food comes from as long as it comes in cheaply. That system is unraveling...I think Slow Food is in a unique position, frankly, as an institution, to help individuals and organizations through initiatives that bring us together (Downs).

The podcast hosts concluded the interview by referring to Slow Food as a “North Star” capable of helping people to make sense of the current state of the world, especially in this time of “national incoherence” (Downs).
At this time of global uncertainty when the values of so many are being shaken, there appears to be a definitive rallying among food activists, quite often with Slow Food at the fore. In his book, *Eating with Conscience*, author Michael Fox writes that consumers are taught that they can become “kitchen anarchists” simply by supporting local, humane, organic farmers and market co-ops (Fox 12). A growing contingency is answering the clarion call to “vote with your fork”, becoming part of a broad movement to build alternatives to the dominant food systems (Pollan, *Voting with Your Fork*). Slow Food has become the predominant beacon of light in this upsurge of meaningful consumerism and food advocacy as a means of gaining greater connectivity and hope, giving its subscribers an alternative to feeling, as Ellwood puts it, “powerless and left behind” (133).

2. In An Emergent Religion, Tradition Becomes “New” by Taking on Some New Focus, Making it Unique

Ellwood’s second feature of an emergent religion is that it singularly characterizes and differentiates itself from all other faiths. He states that an emergent religion typically makes a jump to something new by selecting out of the amorphous sea of tradition one person, teaching, practice or group as its focus, to give it “a new, crisp, distinct shape.” It sets up “one sacred practice or rite out of many possibilities.” This selectivity gives it a unique identity within the predominant religious complex. It offers a “simple key” to the essence of an “immense experience” (134).

There are two concurrent and unique focuses of Slow Food that set it apart from both the greater food movement and the mainstream attitude toward food consumption in
general. Firstly, it is exclusive in its strategic positioning of itself in opposition to the culture of fast food. Secondly, it distinctly underscores sensory pleasure and the slow, deliberate, conscious savoring of life as its primary modus operandi. Illustrating how interwoven into the fabric of Slow Food these two themes are is an account from Folco Portinari in Carlo Petrini’s book, *Slow Food Revolution*. Portinari was a television executive in Milan at the time Slow Food was conceived. In the excerpt, he relates that, over dinner one evening, he and the other members of Arcigola “sat around grumbling about how Italy had become consumed with television and consumerism.” That was precisely when Petrini called on him to draft a manifesto that stated their philosophy, while the small Arcigola collective devised a plan to fight back.

Some historic Italian restaurants, even in Florence, had transformed themselves into fast food joints. Hearing about this kind of thing drove us to come up with the idea of containing the barbaric invasion by means of Slow Food: it was intended as a defense maneuver. Carlo asked me to write a manifesto with our philosophy… I set down to work… we wanted to reclaim the value of pleasure and of the body. I came up with the expression, ‘fast life’, which seemed to sum up all of the daily rituals of which fast food was a part. As a subtitle for the manifesto I wrote “International Movement for the Defense of and the Right to Pleasure” (Petrini & Padovani 70).

As Portinari’s recollections attest, the twofold mission of Slow Food to impede the spread of fast food and promote a self-proclaimed “right to pleasure” has been paramount since the beginning of the movement. To this day, Slow Food asserts itself as a response to the global trend that Portinari labeled as “fast life” and what sociologist George Ritzer has since identified as “McDonaldization.” This phenomenon, Ritzer explains, occurs when a culture grows to possess the characteristics of a fast food restaurant (*McDonaldization: The Reader* 2). He describes McDonaldization as a very “rational system” that relies on
speed, efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, usually through the use of “nonhuman technologies.” Despite the system’s great success, accounting for its widespread implementation, Ritzer points out that McDonaldization not only has “negative effects on the environment,” but has begun to “dehumanize the world” leading to a series of “nonhuman or even anti-human activities and behaviors” (3).

Where Max Weber used the model of bureaucracy to characterize the direction of a changing society, Ritzer sees the fast food restaurant as having become a more representative contemporary paradigm (53). Ritzer states, “McDonaldization has spread far beyond the fast food industry to occupy a central place in American culture.” It affects not only the restaurant business but also “virtually every other aspect of society,” sweeping through seemingly “impervious institutions.” To this point, Ritzer argues that evidence of McDonaldization can be found in American churches, universities and museums among many other settings (203).

Having recognized McDonaldization or fast life as a dire international issue, Petrini and the members of Arcigola intentionally chose to christen their retaliatory movement “Slow Food”. This name, chosen for its delectable irony, sums up the unique identity of the movement’s ethos in a nutshell. According to Petrini, the title caught on almost immediately, and he attributes its “force and its bite” to the choice of an English language name that conveys a stance that people all over the world immediately recognize (Case for Taste 7). As Corby Kummer relates, “The galvanizing arrival of a clear enemy focused a fledgling movement that had already won the allegiance of thousands of Italians. Now it could rally members from neighboring countries—from all over the world. The new name and new challenge made an international thrust
imperative” (22). Thus Slow Food—from its inception at the Spanish Steps in Italy, where protesters armed with bowls of penne rather than picket signs chanted, “We don’t want fast food… we want slow food!”—has shrouded itself in a symbolic brand of sacramentalism. Its very moniker is an intensive and deliberate act to expand beyond the fast life status quo, the establishment of the industrialization of food, and to highlight the cultural and culinary costs of homogenized eating.

To impress Slow Food’s unique identity on the minds of the masses all the more effectively, its name and easily associated cause as the antithesis of fast food culture is typically accompanied by the implicit symbol of a snail, which Slow Food describes as a “small cosmopolitan and prudent” creature, and an “amulet against speed” (Kummer 22). This mascot has been the symbol of the movement since 1989 when its use was first approved by an international board of Slow Food delegates, largely due to its identifiability and universal appeal. Today, the Slow Food snail has become even more widely recognized because the Snail of Approval Awards are now given to food and beverage artisans and establishments that “contribute to the quality, authenticity and sustainability of the food supply” (slowfoodnyc.org).

Yet another element contributing to Slow Food’s “distinct shape” or unique identity within the food movement is its slogan “Good, Clean and Fair”. According to Petrini, this motif was the result of much soul searching. In 2005, he sensed that the clear and unambiguous cause of Slow Food was becoming blurred as “in the course of 20 years [Slow Food] had evolved so much—and grown more complicated.” Recognizing this, he and a collaborator sought to simplify things once again. “When our meditations yielded the little slogan, ‘Good, Clean and Fair’ we turned our noses up at it at first… How
wrong we were! It was eventually well received by the whole Slow Food movement and has become the slogan-cum-banner... handy for communication among ourselves... for further refining our philosophy and ordering our thoughts and actions... Good, Clean and Fair is catchy" (Food & Freedom 31). The movement’s leaders have found that it translates well into different languages around the world, whether in the midst of an American farmer’s market or a Kenyan elementary school. Petrini relates that he has seen it written in Japanese and Korean ideograms, heard it chanted as a rallying cry in South America, and was almost moved to tears when he saw it daubed in paint on huts in a small village in Mexico, along with a huge image of the Slow Food snail. As Petrini says, “the title has evidently hit the mark” (Food & Freedom 30-31).

The universally appealing trinity of Slow Food’s moniker, mascot and slogan have been of critical importance to the emerging movement, providing what Ellwood would describe as a straightforward system that has given Slow Food’s principles “a new, crisp, distinct shape.” People can easily embrace and take to the streets (or, more specifically, their local farmer’s markets, homes and community kitchens) with these simple, striking keys to the Slow Food lifestyle.

The movement’s deliberate concentration on sensory pleasure and the slow savoring of regional cuisine also continue to differentiate it from other subsets of the food movement, as well as from the typical approach to consumption. As Portinari declared in the subtitle to The Slow Food Manifesto, it is the International Movement for the Defense of and the Right to Pleasure. Indeed, within the text of the ordinance itself, there are several examples of how Slow Food has chosen to focus on this “one sacred practice or rite out of many possibilities” (Ellwood 134). It states, “A firm defense of quiet material
pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of fast life.” That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it.” In this way, Slow Food has clearly stated not only its opposition to all things fast life, but also its tactic for retaliation via deliberately seeking out and facilitating slow, pleasurable experiences. In his book, Slow Food: A Case for Taste, Petrini describes this as the bedrock upon which the Slow Food movement is firmly fixed. He reiterates, “The pleasures of the table are the gateway to recovering a gentle and harmonious rhythm of life” (24). Simple and unique, this concept effectively sets Slow Food apart and identifies an approach that is easily and eagerly grasped by new enthusiasts.

3. An Emergent Religion Involves a Charismatic Leader who is Central in the Development of the Religion

Carlo Petrini, the founder and charismatic leader of the “church” of Slow Food has longtime experience in acting as a luminary for a crusade. His magnetic personality has inspired and mobilized supporters not only in Italy but across the globe, resulting in a worldwide ever-growing reservoir of faithful Slow Food devotees. This is significant because, in Ellwood’s model, the nascent religion typically centers around a charismatic individual who “by the reliance of his or her own personality—the appeal of what he or she is, rather than any structural authority—draws the people to him or her” (134). According to varied and numerous accounts, Carlo Petrini is just such a natural born leader.

Exemplary of Petrini’s magnetism, as well as of his followers’ collective enthrallment with him and his message, is an article in The Guardian which begins with a description
of his keynote speech at the *Salone del Gusto*. This event is Slow Food’s biennial jamboree and is now one of the world’s premier food fairs attracting more than 180,000 people over the course of its five days.

Six thousand people rise to their feet and start to applaud enthusiastically. A young woman close to me in the audience starts chanting "Carlin! Carlin! Carlin!" The house lights in the packed indoor arena dim and, after a few handshakes with members of the front row, Carlo Petrini takes to the stage before meekly beckoning for silence so he can begin his speech. Rock star? Self-help guru? Superchurch preacher? Carlo Petrini—or Carlin, as he is affectionately known by friends and fans—is none of these, yet in his native Italy he commands a following few others can match (Hickman).

Petrini has exhibited his leadership since the days of his youth. According to his manifold lifelong friends, many of whom have also been perpetual coworkers, he was ever ready to embark on an adventure no matter what the risk, provided it furthered a cause he was passionate about. His first significant foray into community service was at the age of 17 in 1966, when he became Italy’s youngest president of a Catholic organization with 130 members. Under his leadership, the group raised enough money (20 million lire, about $175,000 today) to open a school for illiterate adults—an experience Petrini says sparked his interest in social activism. One former classmate said, “Carlo believed in human values… he had ideas and succeeded in getting people involved in a project. He was always cheerful and smiling” (Padovani 26). In a documentary about Slow Food, aptly titled *Slow Food Story*, another childhood friend states, “My friend Carlo has become an important figure. He’s on television, he writes for one of the most renowned newspapers, he’s the founder of a university, has an honorary degree, is the subject of many studies. But, despite all that, he hasn’t changed…”
Although Petrini seems to have always taken his role as an activist seriously, his devotion to spending quality time with friends and having fun are equally strongly held commitments.

After secondary school, Petrini entered the University of Trento as a sociology student while simultaneously working as a food product salesman. During this time he spent more hours working and being involved in various social service agencies than he spent at school, often showing up only to take exams. It was after his college graduation and mandatory Italian military service that he embraced the political fervor of the early 1970s wholeheartedly. In 1975, at the age of twenty-six, he founded the premier leftwing, independent radio station in his region of Italy. This marked his transition into fully devoting himself to initiatives and associations of his own creation (Padovani 26).

Although enmeshed in social advocacy, the young Petrini was unwilling to tolerate an ethic of all work and no play, as “music and humor were as much in Petrini’s blood as politics” (Padovani 32). With seemingly boundless energy he dove into multiple endeavors, all oriented toward reform but based on fun and pleasure. During this time, for example, he established a regional folk festival and sent musicians into schools and private homes to bring traditional songs of the region to the townspeople. “I came to understand,” says Petrini, “that those who suffer for others do more damage to humanity than those who enjoy themselves. Pleasure is a way of being at one with yourself and others” (Kummer 18). Petrini would further prove his commitment to the cause of mixing advocacy and enjoyment by opening up a cooperative grocery store, a political bookstore that doubled as a culture club and a modest restaurant in the early 1980s. Not only would the latter establishment commit itself to serving good food at low prices, but it would also
act as a gathering place to the community. It was there that Petrini and his friends held boisterous suppers that lasted until dawn, joining together the pleasures of food, good company and learning. They distrusted “moralistic revolutionaries” and “anyone who doesn’t laugh” (Kummer 19).

Between wine tastings and rallies against the atomic bomb, Petrini formed a group—the forerunner to Slow Food—that initially attracted hundreds of members. Italian food editor, Andrea Gabbrielli writes, “He inspired a genuine interest in food culture, which he refused to see as an exclusive privilege of the intellectual right or the bourgeois gourmets” (Padovani 15). At one point, given his well-honed organizational skills, Petrini even considered being a cultural impresario (Padovani 17). His cultural activities, however, always seemed to connect back to the land and its traditions as a vehicle to reconnect people to their roots and effect political change, pointing to the grander scheme of things. Throughout his many years in public service, most recently as a self-proclaimed “eco-gastronome”, he has mastered the art of selling sensual gratification to activists.

Alice Waters, who has been Vice President of Slow Food International since 2002, says of Petrini, “His voice is, above all, that of a person whose senses are expertly attuned, and whose mind is in constant exercise. It is a voice that is also irresistibly engaging. His argument has both the warm familial resonance of your favorite uncle’s storytelling and the bracing intellectual rigor of your most inspiring teacher; its tone… is that of the calm and hopeful voice of reason itself. You will like this voice” (Slow Food Nation ix). More than likely it is not his voice alone, but his message, that gives him the capacity to mobilize legions of devoted followers who are ready and willing to
wholeheartedly support the Slow Food cause. One associate says, “He has this capacity that very few people have, to raise emotions in an audience, to make them care about something. To charge them up with energy” (Sardo).

If an emergent religion is to sustain itself, its founder needs willing emissaries and congregants to lead. Most especially, according to Ellwood, the movement needs converts who have made a “self-conscious, adult choice—which gives it a reservoir of highly committed persons.” This also means that it must maintain a level of intensity sufficient to counteract familial and societal pressures (134). Ellwood describes a disciple as “a special type of religious personality in his or her own right” who is “essential to the founder to transmit his or her message as well as to provide an intimate audience for it allowing for the lasting institutionalization of the newly founded religion” (140).

As has been abundantly illustrated, motivating and mobilizing people for a cause is not a difficult task for Carlo Petrini. As one dedicated adherent puts it, “He has an incredible ability to captivate. He’s really like an illusionist. He can win over incredible people in the most incredible situations” (Sardo). This is fortunate for Slow Food because, as Ellwood points out, such followers are the crux of any religion. Petrini has been flanked by not only an ever-present but ever-growing band of disciples since his earliest foray into political activism. His inside circle of supporters, almost all of whom are well known and highly regarded in their own right in Italy, have been with him from day one of Slow Food’s inception. Beyond that, he has a bevy of international disciples in the ranks of Slow Food organizers, journalists, chefs and restaurateurs, who are all adept at extolling the virtues of Slow Food to the people of their respective countries—paving Petrini’s way into their hearts well before he ever even makes a personal appearance. For
example, in the United States, which is the country with the fastest growing contingency of Slow Food adherent, the individuals who are the most ardently faithful to the Slow Food movement have already built passionate followings within their fields of note. Included among these devotees, are: Corby Kummer, senior food editor for The Atlantic Monthly who Petrini called, “one of the most effective ambassadors we have in the world” (9); Alice Waters, chef and owner of famed restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkley, California; Mark Bittman, New York Times food columnist; Michael Pollan, professor of journalism at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism; and Eric Schlosser, best-selling author and investigative journalist. These personalities, along with a stable of professional Italian and international journalists, make up a talented and impressive group of envoys.

In the previously quoted passage from The Guardian describing Petrini’s natural capacity to ignite fervor in his followers and the immense enthusiasm of his Slow Food devotees at the biennial Salone del Gusto, the author of the article compares the scenario to one surrounding a rock star, self-help guru or super church preacher. Interestingly enough, the latter comparison is not an uncommon one. Diverse writers, followers and personal friends of Petrini have often been moved to describe him using this type of religious rhetoric.

In an article titled, Carlo Petrini: The Slow Food gourmet who started a revolution, Peter Popham writes, “[He is] the rarest of creatures, a successful revolutionary. For Petrini is the founder, prophet and guiding light of the Slow Food movement” (Popham). Matching that religious tone, Petrini’s long-time associate, Corby Kummer writes in his book, The Pleasures of Slow Food, “Even in his early twenties,
Petrini had an unusual talent for speaking with extreme clarity and for listening carefully, his huge brown eyes seeming to comprehend, priest-like, the true intent that lay behind the words of anyone speaking to him” (18). Describing Petrini’s ability to articulate with a measure of clarity that evokes insight and zeal in others, disciple Alice Waters writes, “Few thinkers have been able to convey the delight of enlightenment so well. Carlo argues that such enlightenment can be available to every person on the planet” (*Slow Food Nation* x). One of Petrini’s longtime friends, while recalling his recovery from a grave and rare illness, even compared him to one of the ultimate figures in established religion, saying, “Carlo is like Jesus. He made a comeback. But unlike [Jesus] who came back and then didn’t show up much, [Carlo] recovered and went back to working like crazy” (Sardo). Another journalist, Jasper Gerard, writes in his article, *Slow Food guru Spreads Gospel in High Places*, “Not since Jesus rustled up a feast from some fishes and a few loaves of bread… have we invested food with such spiritual qualities; and if food has become the faith of a decadent West, its high priest is Carlo Petrini.” He continues, “When the founder of the Slow Food movement met the Prince of Wales last week it was hard to say who was having the audience” (Gerard).

Befitting that of a church leader, too, is Petrini’s manner while in the company of world-leaders whom he treats as peers—one of the most notable being Prince Charles. Prince Charles, who was already a devoted fan of Petrini’s work prior to their meeting, gladly accepted an invitation to give the closing speech at the Slow Food *Terra Madre—World Meeting of Food Communities* event in 2008 in a “deliberate effort to draw attention to the movement” (Padovani 174). One of Petrini’s associates describes this meeting by saying, “I was surprised how [Petrini] could immediately get along with a
minister, or an important politician. It’s impressive because after 3 minutes he says, ‘Look, let’s be informal. I’m Carlo’” (Sardo). The same woman relates, “Everyone raced to tell Carlo that there is a certain protocol because [Prince Charles is] royalty, you have to address him a certain way. Everyone was giving him advice and Carlo just looks at him, slaps him on the shoulder, offers his hand and says, ‘Prince! What a pleasure.’ And from then on the Prince loved him madly, because no one had ever dared to break the protocols. And that’s how their friendship was born” (Sardo). Prince Charles has maintained an active alliance with Petrini to this day, and recently addressed Slow Food adherents with a plea that they uphold their uniqueness and continue to treat food as “an art form” by displaying their “wonderful, traditional craft skills”. Adding a familiar spiritual tone to his remarks he continued, “Believe you me, we need cultural and spiritual security, not just biosecurity. We can’t separate these elements. What is the point of food security, if we lose our souls?” (“The Prince and Petrini”).

Another highly influential figure with whom Petrini has made a personal alliance is the Holy Father, Pope Francis. As his relationship with Prince Charles illustrates, it is obvious Petrini is not one to hold back from approaching influential luminaries, regardless of their station, if it can in any way further his cause. Such was the case when Petrini sent the pope his latest book and fondest regards shortly after he was elected to the papacy. A sense of ease and soulful camaraderie similar to what Petrini shares with Prince Charles echoes in his recollection of a recent conversation with Pope Francis, who called him to thank him for his gift. “I was amazed and delighted by a subsequent conversation with someone who felt like a friend…” The conversation purportedly ended with well wishes and mutual embrace. Petrini says of the experience, “A world in which
one can fraternally embrace a pope is truly a beautiful world” (slowfood.com). He also related that the words he and the pope shared affected him deeply. “I have been an agnostic since I was young, but the absence of religiousness has not stopped me from sharing experiences and struggles with men and women of faith… I know that if humanity wants to escape the desert of ideas that surrounds it, people who know how to communicate like Pope Francis will be of great value” (slowfood.com). Indeed, their relationship has already proven to be of significant worth to the Slow Food movement as the pope specifically mentioned its principle of conviviality in his recent catechesis, referring to it as a “precious virtue.” Petrini has since acted in kind by publishing a Preface to Pope Francis’s Encyclical on Climate Change on the Slow Food website, the tone of which shows great respect and even admiration for the pope while still maintaining Petrini’s secular position on faith.

Whether it be in front of an audience numbering in the thousands, in a schoolyard with a class of children, in a five-star restaurant with a chef-turned-disciple or in audience with a prince or the pope, Petrini’s affable way and intense commitment to the cause of bringing “Good, Clean and Fair” food to every corner of the world has solidified his popularity. This has set him comfortably within the ranks of some of the highest regarded leaders on the planet while also opening wide the doors of his church to admit masses of devout congregants. These eager followers, already hungry for change and the brand of fulfillment touted by the Slow Food movement, have been captivated by Petrini’s charismatic leadership, which has transformed them from casual enthusiasts into full-fledged devotees.
4. An Emergent Religion Emphasizes the Future—Looking Ahead to Better Times

The fourth and final characteristic of an emergent religion as put forth by Ellwood is the emphasis on a future orientation. This is especially appealing to new members of a nascent faith given Ellwood’s premier assertion that religions emerge at a time of uncertainty. The primary importance of such a focus is that it offers the ultimate vision of possibility for the faith, serving to inspire adherents and drive its mission forward.

Petrini has often implemented just such a utopian prophecy in his heralding of Slow Food. In one of his books he writes, “There is also a different world of production and consumption, parallel to the currently dominant one, which contains the seeds of a better global system” (Slow Food Nation 1). Petrini touts this new global system, which harkens back to the more traditional ideals of fresh, homemade repast saying, “I am convinced that he who sows utopia will reap reality” (40). According to Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch’s Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias, “Slow Food is typical of many utopian groups, for it looks to an ideal past in order to promote its distinct vision of a better present and future, one in which human beings are ‘saved’ by learning to slow down, develop taste memories, experience true pleasure, and live authentically, with deeply felt connections to each other and a more humane, ‘civilized’ world” (3).

With this vision for the future in mind, leaders of the Slow Food movement have initiated several long-term projects with worldwide reach and a focus on influencing future generations. One such initiative is The Slow Food Award, called the “Nobel Prize of biodiversity” (Kummer 22). This award is given to agricultural activists and inspiring
artisans, mostly from developing nations, who help defend the world’s imperiled culinary ingredients. The Slow Food Award plays into the movement’s greater, overarching mission of protecting the biodiversity of the planet by bringing otherwise obscure producers to international attention and giving them an avenue of concrete assistance.

Another future-oriented mission of Slow Food is to educate the masses in hopes of transforming insensible consumers into true food aficionados, capable of “appreciating and evaluating” their culinary choices. Petrini writes, “We believe that the generations of the future have to understand what quality food is and where it comes from” (*Case for Taste* 63). In order for this to occur, Petrini adds, a “new environmental conscience” must be adopted with education playing a principle role (79). As a result, several initiatives have been dedicated to this mission, targeting children of kindergarten age all the way up to university students. Petrini believes, given that children are the consumers of tomorrow, “it is a matter of urgency to intervene in the early years of life, when tastes and distastes are formed” (73). One example of the Slow Food teaching programs found in the U.S., Italy and across the world that touches the lives of young consumers is *The Edible Schoolyard*. This “edible curriculum,” designed for kindergarten through high school aged students, was first introduced into United States public schools beginning in Berkley, California under the guidance of Alice Waters. She has described the program as a “visionary model for sustainable farming and childhood nutrition, and a call to action for schools across the country” (Waters 7).

Perhaps of premier importance in the attainment of a well-educated worldwide food community is *The University of Gastronomic Sciences* (UNISG). This private university legally recognized by the Italian state, with a curriculum dedicated to
spreading sustainable practices in relation to the growing, processing, preparation and consumption of food products, grooms the next generation of “knowledgeable and committed” Slow Food gastronomes (unisg.it). It was founded by Petrini himself in 2004, and he continues to take an active part in the student body’s academic life by serving as president. A student, Shakirah Simley, says about Petrini and her experience at the university, “[Petrini] is a visionary… he did his part in having the idea and the vision, and now with the university it’s our job to take these things and put them into practice” (Sardo). Students such as Simley are the “new professional figures” who, by means of their UNISG education, cultivate a wide range of skills and graduate to become the next generation of “educators and innovators, editors and multimedia broadcasters, marketers of fine products, and managers of consortia, businesses, and tourism companies” (unisg.it). In other words, an army of well-groomed culinary talent, capable of executing most aspects of the Slow Food vision of a utopian future, ripe with validation and a newfound sense of collective and personal liberation.

On the imperative of this systematic education, Petrini states, “In the end, the children, the adolescents and the teachers will have the tools necessary to select pleasures, tastes, variety. It won’t be easy for them to flounder in the chaos of fast life; they will be a new type, ready to defend themselves against attacks on their own senses and improve the quality of their own lives. Aware consumers will come into being” (Case for Taste 76). Thus, these education-based initiatives are seen to foster Slow Food values on a deeply individual level with the belief that, as each person learns how to make informed choices for themselves, the collective experience of society will change for the better as well. It is simultaneously an idealistic and practical approach that seeks
to influence communities of the future via the education and empowerment of individuals today, taking for granted that a Slow Food perspective offers the ultimate key to a better world.

Although an idealist, Petrini has been a reformer in the trenches of the Slow Food movement himself for decades. This, no doubt, is why he is sure to stress the need for commitment and dedication when he speaks to younger generations about the work. “Keep striving, young people,” he implores. “Make the world better and more beautiful than it has ever been!” With that summons a new crop of expectant and impassioned culinary visionaries are propelled into action (Weaver x).

Another particularly comprehensive Slow Food entity that emphasizes a future orientation is the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity. Inaugurated in 2003 by Slow Food International and Slow Food Italy, it is an umbrella organization for Slow Food’s main initiatives that “coordinates and promotes Slow Food’s projects to protect food biodiversity across the world”. Its mission, as stated on their website, is essentially a clarion call. “The battle to save biodiversity is not just any battle. It is a battle for the future of the planet. Every one of us can do something, in our local area, every day. We must not dwell on what we have lost, but focus on what we can still save” (fondazioneslowfood.com).

Included among the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity’s many initiatives are 10,000 Gardens in Africa, The Slow Food Presidia, Slow Food Chefs’ Alliance, Earth Markets and Slow Food Youth Network. Each of these programs is extremely future-focused, while also taking on projects that can have an immediate impact on the people
and communities involved. 10,000 Gardens in Africa, for example, has a vision of “creating 10,000 good, clean and fair food gardens” in African schools and communities across the continent. Not only does it strive to raise awareness among young generations about the importance of food biodiversity and healthy, fresh food, but it also provides training to a network of leaders who can serve as “protagonists for change” and protectors of the continent’s land and culture for generations to come. In another example, The Slow Food Presidia is an international project working with groups of small-scale producers to help them resolve difficulties they face and connect them with alternative markets that respect their unique and “quality products”. This is not only viewed as a way of supporting small business and the economy, but as a safeguard for traditional production techniques at risk of extinction so that they may continue to be passed on and enjoyed. As stated in the book *Food Utopias*, “Presidia are performative experimentations and, in pursuing the utopia articulated by the Slow Food movement that is its vision of an ideal food system, they are the enactment of such a utopian vision” (Stock 92). Today, more than 500 Presidia across the globe involve more than 13,000 producers. All of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity’s programs have been created with a future vision in mind. Petrini says, “Just as the agricultural calendar sets a time for harvesting, today we are planting seeds of a process of regeneration that demands patience and purposefulness: The harvest, we truly believe, will be abundant” (*Case for Taste* 81).

Beyond the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, another forum for idealistic Slow Food disciples the world over is *Terra Madre*, an international network found in 150 countries, representing and uniting about 1,600 “food communities.” Bringing
together farmers, fishers, artisans, nomad shepherds young and old, traditional musicians, breeders, chefs, academics, young people, nonprofits and representatives of local communities, Terra Madre seeks to “establish a system of good, clean and fair food from the grassroots level.” Their vision is to encourage a “new approach to gastronomy, based on the defense of biodiversity and environmental protection” while maintaining utmost respect for local cultures, customs and traditions. Especially notable are the Terra Madre conferences held in Turin, Italy every two years at which these “true caretakers” of the earth come together from every continent to build connections, share knowledge and contribute to an even stronger network. It has been said of the conferences that “language barriers are easily overcome, cultural differences celebrated and long-held secrets of the land and sea are shared.” Petrini himself describes his Terra Madre supporters as a powerful audience teeming with diversity, pride and enthusiasm. “[This is] a network that is rapidly becoming one of the largest at the service of the planet,” he says (Terra Madre xi).

As Slow Food regards the custodians of the earth as currently being undervalued and oppressed by both unchecked development and the global market, the Terra Madre network offers them solutions that originate locally and then often spread across the world. This work is considered vital to ward off the “ongoing depletion of natural resources due to unsustainable usage and extraction” and, through their efforts, Terra Madre communities “offer a concrete example of the Slow Food philosophy, from the preservation of plant varieties and animal breeds, to local culinary cultures that have developed over time to allow natural resources to be preserved, not depleted” (terramadre.info).
In addition to prophetic claims of future vindication, Ellwood asserts that an emergent religion also ultimately promises, “what you have already seen is nothing compared to what God or the gods will bring to pass” (134). To this point, Slow Food International has created The Ark of Taste which emulates the assurance of a new world as they see it to be illustrated in the Genesis flood narrative of Noah’s Ark. This non-profit project aims to save the world from the “flood” of homogenizing overindulgences of modern society. Modeled after Noah’s preemptive ark in Genesis, Slow Food’s Ark of Taste was created to identify and champion “delicious” and “distinctive” food products and draw attention to the risk of their extinction. An advisory board composed of researchers, journalists and other food “experts” evaluates products proposed for inclusion into this conceptual ark and develops intervention strategies to facilitate their “rescue.” Slow Food uses this scriptural imagery to invite people from across the globe to protect “small-scale quality productions that belong to the cultures, history and traditions of the planet: an endangered heritage of fruits, vegetables, animal breeds, cheeses, breads, sweets and cured meats.” Avenues for this conservation include telling a product’s story to increase demand, supporting their producers, or, as in the case of endangered wild species, eating less or none of them to preserve them and favor their reproduction. Slow Food chapters host Ark tastings, Ark “grow outs” and Ark of Taste dinners, providing still more opportunity for members to gather in community, while keeping sacrosanct and uppermost in their minds the Slow Food mission (slowfoodusa.org).

While acknowledging that all of these initiatives call for “an urgent shift in paradigm in our relationship to food”, Alice Waters maintains that Petrini’s message “is far from apocalyptic; instead it is one full of hope, a joyful celebration of the powerful cultural and
natural diversity of the planet” (Terra Madre viii). In fact, Petrini seems ever at the-ready to charismatically deliver yet another motivating and promising message. Seated among students in a lecture hall at the University of Gastronomic Sciences or standing before an impassioned crowd of 3,000 international devotees at Terra Madre, he can be counted on to foresee a pleasurable and abundant future.

Taken together, all of the aforementioned parallels illustrate the many ways that the Slow Food movement resembles an emergent religion as put forth by Robert S. Ellwood in his description of the characteristics of an emergent religion. It has materialized during particularly uncertain and challenging times worldwide, especially in the United States where Slow Food’s largest contingency is found. Its “new focus” offers an easy-to-grasp alternative to the “McDonaldized” or mass-produced lifestyle pervasive in various aspects of modern society while elevating the cause of “the universal right to pleasure”. Finally, aided by a band of devoted and often notable followers, the charismatic Carlo Petrini has attracted and mobilized a solid collective identity that fosters the movement’s progress towards a utopian world offering “better times” ahead. Given the near-perfect correlation between Ellwood’s theory and these aspects of Slow Food, it is only logical to deduce that the phenomenon has all of the components that constitute a new religious movement, and thus functions as such.
Chapter IV
Slow Food Infiltrates Traditional Religion

As the food movement at large gains traction and Slow Food continues to exemplify more characteristics of a bona fide faith, it is significant to note the substantial influence the movement has begun to have on already established religions. Even prior to Petrini’s communications with Pope Francis and—in what may be the ultimate religious stamp of approval—the Pope’s subsequent mention of the “precious virtue” of conviviality in his catechesis, Slow Food’s steady infiltration into the practices of congregations across all faiths could be observed. Now, it is more evident than ever before that the religion of Slow Food and its spirited, if not spiritual, leader are paving the way for reform as traditional religions are not only incorporating more food-related initiatives into their programs, but have also adopted many of the unique values that are intrinsic to the Slow Food mission. Thus, as various established religions acknowledge and even incorporate the principles of Slow Food into their religious ideology, it can be argued that this trend is serving to further legitimize Slow Food’s status among their ranks as an emergent religion in its own right.

Given the close relationship between food and religious observances throughout recorded history, the current food movement’s influence on mainstream religions is not entirely surprising. However, when taking into consideration the shifting religious profile of the world, it appears that there is more to this trend than a simple continuation of the traditional relationship that has always existed between food and faith. Here in the United
States, the number of adults who do not identify with any religion is on the rise from 16.1% unaffiliated in 2007 to 22.8% unaffiliated in 2014 (Pew, “Future of World Religions”). According to the Pew Research Center, these statistics are emblematic of a change that is affecting all religions and many demographic groups in the country. The shift is most significantly notable, however, among members of the “Millennial” generation—those who have entered adulthood in the last few decades, between 1981 and 2000 (Pew, “Future of World Religions”). Although religious affiliation is also on the decline in older generations, Millennials remain far more likely to identify as religious “nones”, or those with no particular religious affiliation. Apparently, that number is on the rise, as 36% of the youngest members of the Millennial generation (9% of whom have left their childhood religion) identify themselves this way. Following this U.S. trend, the religiously unaffiliated of the global population is expected to rise. Surveys and censuses taken in 2010 indicate there were about 1.1 billion atheists, agnostics and people who do not identify as “religious”. By 2050, the unaffiliated population is projected to exceed 1.2 billion (Pew, “Future of World Religions”).

As suggested by multiple sociologists, religion in its myriad forms has served to help humankind in both making sense of, and making sacred, this otherwise chaotic world. So, as the number of religious nones rises, does this indicate that the human need for purpose and for identifying one’s place in the grand scheme of life is diminishing? A far more likely explanation is that other avenues are increasingly being followed to satisfy that role, thereby replacing the need for traditional religions in a growing number of people’s lives. Given the food movement’s tremendous influence in our world today, especially on the Millennial generation, as well as Slow Food’s marked proclivity toward
becoming a new secular faith, it seems plausible that Slow Food is one such entity taking on that role. Gillian McCann, a professor of religion at Nipissing University in Northern Ontario, argues that, as religion has declined, our obsession with the purity of what’s on our plate has grown. She states that, “the rise in food movements has coincided with a decline in religion in society, with many people seeking familiar values such as purity, ethics, goodness…” and she hypothesizes that this search is motivated by a sort of “religious impulse” that goes unrecognized (Boesveld). This could very well be the reason why Millennials, who are the generation most likely to be religiously unaffiliated, have also been dubbed the “foodie” generation.

In her recent book, *A Taste of Generation Yum*, author Eve Turow writes that Millennials have been referred to as “food savants” given that the most distinguishing trait of this young generation is that they “overwhelmingly” spend their time, energy and money on food.

This food fanaticism has seeped into nearly every rank of Millennial populations, and even younger Millennials, those born closer to 2000, now in their early teens, are picking up fervent obsessions with cooking programs, haute ingredients and tasting menus. That means that 40,000 food blogs and hundreds of food magazines, food memoirs, cooking reality shows, and recipe apps created in the last 5 years are likely just on the upswing. Hold onto your plates (Introduction).

In stark contrast to the many traditional places of worship that stand empty across the country, Millennials are filling farmer’s markets, artisan food establishments, urban farms and trendy restaurant to maximum capacity.
Simultaneously, as religious affiliation is on the decline worldwide, a marked increase in food related initiatives within religious organizations is influencing and informing traditional religions across a wide and diverse spectrum of all faiths. This trend reflects a growing number of people who already subscribe to a certain religion, flocking to be part of the food-oriented missions within their conventional congregations. For them, the food movement provides a new way to satisfy cravings for even greater connectivity, purpose and a deeper sense of meaning while still committing themselves to the mission of their chosen faith. In response, religious establishments, noting food’s galvanizing effects on people, are increasingly incorporating ideals of the food movement into traditional forms of worship.

In the Jewish faith community, an organization called Hazon, is seen as a forerunner and testament to the power of the Jewish food movement in the United States. Dedicated to strengthening the engagement between food, faith and the environment, Hazon congregants believe that the more people understand and respect their relationship to the land and food and simultaneously to Jewish tradition, the more active they can be in creating “healthier, more sustainable communities for all.” The organization is growing in numbers with a deliberate focus on “young adults who are interested in developing the skills to take on leadership roles in their communities and make a difference in the world” (hazon.org). One arm of Hazon that is particularly enticing to Jewish youth is JOFEE (Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming and Environmental Education), which connects its members to “Judaism, community and the natural world.” JOFEE engages tens of thousands of people in activities every year, ranging from CSA programs to Jewish harvest rituals, further highlighting the valuable connection between food and
faith. As explicitly stated on their website, they welcome intergenerational participants of all religious backgrounds.

The nascent, but rapidly growing Christian equivalent of Hazon, which Hazon leaders have actively supported as it emerges, is *Churchwork*. Touted as “the roots of the Christian Food Movement” Churchwork’s goal is to “re-imagine food systems in a way that more clearly reflects God’s reign.” On their recently created *Christian Food Movement* website it is stated:

> The wider food movement has grown into a significant force in policy and culture over the past two decades. Christians have been quietly participating all along. But as new ministries incorporating food and agriculture begin, the need has become urgent for us to [establish a Christian Food Movement.](christianfoodmovement.org). 

The Christian Food Movement directory contains listings of all congregations that focus on bringing together food and faith, often in unique ways. Some rather eclectic examples are *A Moveable Feast*, a combination food truck-chapel that ministers primarily to young adults, and *Animal Crackers*, a Sunday school curriculum that “helps people, animals and plants live in harmony as God’s good creation” by connecting church members—young and old—with the global community of *Heifer International*, a charitable organization dedicated to ending world hunger and poverty. Yet another example, *Bread Church*, is a Methodist congregation that bakes *together*, communing over scripture as the bread rises (*churchwork.com*).

*Dinner Church*, an inventive way of sharing Christian communion, has congregations springing up across the United States with purportedly new communities
emerging on a weekly basis (christianfoodmovement.org). It began when St. Lydia’s in
Brooklyn attracted national attention with its weekly service held over dinner. St. Lydia’s
is a progressive LGBTQ affirming congregation that works together to “dispel isolation,
reconnect neighbors, and subvert the status quo.” The church’s motto, “life is lived
around the table,” attracts congregants of all faiths. Also, following the Dinner Church
model of meal-centered worship, is Methodist Pastor Zach Kerzee’s Simple Church in
Grafton, Massachusetts. There, congregants break homemade bread and enjoy
organically grown farm-to-table repast on Thursday evenings in honor and emulation of
the Last Supper.

Fostering the connection between the agrarian “who cultivates the flourishing of
life throughout an ecosystem” and the “faithful Christian leader” is The Farminary at
Princeton seminary. This project trains students in pastoral sensibilities that mirror those
of adept farmers, such as “nurturing the seeds of faith”, persistence in seasons of “slow
growth”, cultivating abundant “harvests” and revering the sacred wonder of life and
death. The Farminary integrates theological education with small-scale sustainable
agriculture on the seminary’s 21-acre farm. Princeton sees this project as a “garden of
innovation and an incubator for leadership” (farminary.ptsem.edu).

Within the Catholic Church, various orders of nuns called “Green Sisters” are
following suit by “pushing the bounds of their tradition toward a new and deeply spiritual
kind of environmentalism” (Evancie). Some sisters till the soil while other less active or
aging nuns have taken to turning over the land rights of their convents and cloisters to
organic farmers. Green Mountain Monastery, a wood-heated farmhouse on 160 acres of
balsam forest in northern Vermont, is another iteration of spiritual communities taking on
environmental dimensions. As the monastery’s co-founder Sister Gail Worcelo puts it, “Religious communities come into existence because of cultural or historical urgency…and in our time, we see the urgency [as] planetary.”

Religious traditions outside of Judaism and Christianity are also actively incorporating this food-focused trend into their traditional forms of worship. Buddhists bring mindfulness to the table at The Institute of Mindful Agriculture, located on Hawthorn Valley Farm in Ghent, New York. The Institute is a collaboration of the Biodynamic Association of North America, the Hawthorn Valley Association, and the Presencing Institute at MIT. Its mission is to “shape a new cultural narrative” and a “new agricultural paradigm” via learning communities that base their practices on evolutionary farming. This focus is not unique to The Institute of Mindful Agriculture, however, as various collectives of farmers across the U.S. are now advocating and teaching “Sacred Agriculture” or “regenerative farming with divine intent” which incorporates many of the same ideals into the everyday functions of working farms (biodynamics.com). Within the Islamic faith, Beyond Halal is seeking to bring Muslim ethics to contemporary food production. Their intention is to explore a deeper connection to food and spirituality by paying attention to “practical, sustainable, everyday habits and actions that improve our physical and spiritual lives” (beyondhalal.org). Meanwhile future representatives of the Hindu faith at Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa can earn their BA in Sustainable Living while simultaneously studying Transcendental Meditation. This degree program teaches a brand of “deep sustainability” in which they “practice agriculture in a renewable way that replenishes the health of the earth, the individual, and society as a whole.” Faculty at Maharishi University include Indian scholars that teach a
variety of courses on permaculture, organic agriculture, living soils and Vedic agriculture, which utilizes ancient Vedic agricultural technologies that honor and celebrate the earth (mum.edu).

Given the myriad examples across a wide and diverse spectrum of faiths, it is evident that the impact of the food movement on established religion is substantial and ever expanding. The influence of the Slow Food movement specifically can also be seen in organized religion, as is evidenced in what is probably the most pertinent example to this study: Slow Church. Authors C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison coined the term and started a movement when they published their book, Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus in 2013. The fact that Slow Church sounds very familiar is no accident—according to Smith, it is a direct derivative of the Slow Food movement, and he and Pattison chose the name “very deliberately” in order to show that. “The key virtues of Slow Church, which overlap and intersect in substantial ways with one another, are Ethics, Ecology and Economy,” says Smith. “We adapted these virtues from the Slow Food movement that is focused on food that is good, clean and fair… interpreting it into language that is more familiar to Christian theology” (Wytsma).

In the foreword of Smith and Pattison’s book, Slow Church is described as “an invitation into the long, rich, deep and necessarily slow conversation about what it means to be part of the movement that Jesus started 2000 years ago” (16). One might add, with a little help from Carlo Petrini! Slow Church, like Slow Food, bemoans the industrialization and homogenization of modern day life, pitting itself against what Smith and Pattison identify as the McDonaldization of church. They cite “plug-and-play ministries, target marketing, celebrity pastors, tightly scripted worship performances,
corporate branding, the substitution of nonhuman technology for human work, church growth formulas… and programs upon programs upon programs… that entice us with promises of miraculous results in just a few easy steps” as the faltering trends that characterize this phenomenon (15).

Just as Slow Food attracts members who are seeking an alternative to an impersonal, corporate food system, Slow Church supporters are those who have grown suspect of the “scrubbed and polished” approach found in not all, but many houses of worship. They feel that too many fast food, consumer-driven values such as standardization, obsession with efficiency, predictability and calculability are at play. For them, Slow Church offers a more measured and well-rounded approach to worship that promises to “balance busy lives with quiet time, fellowship and good food” (Shellnutt). Yes, food still takes on an alluring role in this religious derivative of Slow Food. Smith and Pattison specifically advocate the philosophy and language of the Slow Food movement as a means to “rethink the ways in which we share life together in our church communities”, and as the Slow Church movement grows, it is influencing—and in some cases overtaking—other church initiatives as rapidly as Slow Food spread across the culinary landscape (Shellnutt).

Not surprisingly, discussions around Slow Church take place not only in church basements, but also in “passionately local” restaurants, as is the case with the Fuller Theological Seminary in Houston, Texas (Shellnutt). Other advocates like Staci McAteer, an Episcopalian minister’s wife intent on following the Slow Church model, use food in more subtle ways to facilitate changes in habitual worship that can make congregants slow down and focus more directly on God. These changes can be as small as offering
communion bread that is homemade. “You actually have to chew it,” says McAteer, “and that slows you down right there” (Shellnutt).

Also emphasizing the “Slow” in Slow Church, theology professor Phil Kenneson remarked at a recent Slow Church conference in Englewood, Tennessee, “the current pace of American culture isn’t very conducive for spiritual growth, which requires stability and patience”. He believes the language of Slow Church, much of which has been directly borrowed from Slow Food, helps to make people aware of the need for “deliberate spiritual development” (Smietana). Adding to that conversation, Pastor Kyle Childress of Austin Heights Baptist Church in Texas says, “we are talking about taking time for the things that are most important… All Slow Food is doing is reminding us of some of the essentials of the Christian faith we’ve overlooked in our rush and our love of speed, efficiency and bigness” (Shellnutt).

One example of how Slow Church is being incorporated into everyday church life can be found in Calvary Episcopal Church’s eco-friendly community garden in Richmond, Virginia. Known as Growing in Grace, the garden “provides more than 1,000 pounds of food annually to local food banks” and offers “church members, volunteers and troubled kids a place to get their hands into God's earth” (Shellnutt). Another example is the current trend among large churches—such as Second Baptist in Houston, Texas—hosting Discovery Dinners in an effort to cultivate deeper connections between staff members and new congregants. Meanwhile small church networks in Houston like Home Church are also breaking bread together each week, “in living rooms and dining rooms across the city.” Ecclesia Church in Montrose, Texas has established Simple Feast,
which brings church members together to cook, share and enjoy homemade meals with the homeless in their neighborhood.

According to the authors of Slow Church:

The Slow Food movement is fundamentally about the richness of a common life with the neighbors who grow our food, prepare our food and share our food. Slow church is a call for intentionality and awareness of our mutual interdependence with all people and all creation, and attentiveness to the world around us and the work God is doing in our very own neighborhoods (Smith & Pattison 16).

Slow Church, therefore, has set forth to cut across all denominational lines, prompting congregations of all kinds and sizes to deliberately focus on context and become more deliberately reverent by going slower and even emulating simpler times that hearken back to an agrarian way of life.

As food-based initiatives that incorporate the principles of the greater food movement, as well as the very core tenants of Slow Food, are being increasingly adopted and interwoven into the day-to-day spiritual life of inventive congregations across all faiths, their natural resonance is becoming clear. With the Slow Food movement’s proclivity toward becoming its own religion, it seems that its core tenants—enjoying a wholesome meal, taking pleasure in planting and tilling a garden, opening up to camaraderie—are equally well-suited to other theologies. Though Petrini has yet to publicly comment on this trend taking place in traditional houses of worship, he would be hard-pressed to argue that it is an unexpected one. Indeed, the religiously-minded masses who are adopting his philosophies in hopes of experiencing greater fulfillment in their faith-based practices are exemplifying what could be considered conviviality at its best.
In so doing, they are collectively affirming the great ability of food, and in many cases, Slow Food specifically, to enhance and even intensify faith.
Chapter V
Summary and Conclusion

Anyone who has enjoyed a meal artfully and mindfully prepared knows that eating can precipitate a transcendent experience. A common kitchen, when entered with reverence and presence, can provide a space as sacred and life-affirming as a church, temple or mosque. A dinner table replete with bountiful offerings and lit candles can be akin to an altar. Whether it is singing the praises of an especially talented cook, or of the Lord in a Sunday hymn, both experiences bring people together in evident communion with one another. Perhaps the tendency to link food to religion is so naturally spawned because each, in the best of circumstances, catapults us beyond separation and isolation into the recognition of a commonality between us. They highlight a bond we all share that seeks to not only make meaning, but that craves the sacred—the experience of that certain “something more.”

Be it via feasting or fasting, food is considered a tool for spiritual growth. Even as statistics show our society becoming less religiously affiliated, especially among Millennials who are more likely to identify as religious nones than any previous generation, food seems to have maintained its role as a spiritual outlet. Procuring and handling food respectfully, eating mindfully in moderation and providing food to those in need is bringing people together in a collective state of reverence that could rival the atmosphere in any contemporary house of worship. The food movement, which represents a wide spectrum of philosophies concerning the environment, consumption
and health, has split into numerous “sects” representing not only the culinary preferences but the moral beliefs of many enthusiastic adherents. The Slow Food movement has especially garnered a very passionate following and, throughout its evolution, has exhibited numerous characteristics of an emergent religion while still formally maintaining its secularity. Thus, as is evidenced by these trends, a tipping of the scales is taking place in which the experience of eating is no longer regarded as merely a possible stepping stone on one’s way to religious piety, but rather an answer in and of itself to our collective soul-searching. Furthermore, as the spiritual dimensions of food-based initiatives like the burgeoning Slow Food movement become increasingly significant in today’s world, religious leaders are taking note. As a result, food, farming, environmentalism and sustainability are now becoming a primary focus within religions that not so long ago granted them only a supporting role.

Due to such trends and the times, food has become more and more central to making meaning. It counteracts feelings of frustration and loss of faith by restoring a believer’s sense of wellbeing in troubled times. By providing a multitude of activist inroads—from seed saving to advocating for animal rights to providing clean food and water for impoverished citizens across the globe—it restores individual and collective confidence. Food serves a euphoric function by offering engaging ways to actively participate in solving a multitude of humankind’s present existential quandaries, reminding us both personally and publically of our deep-seated resonance with transcendent values and ideals.

At the outset of my research into the religious dimensions of the Slow Food movement, it became incumbent upon me to first establish a definition of religion so as to
make my point of reference clear throughout the rest of my analysis. In this endeavor, I was struck by the seemingly onerous complexity of what so many brilliant scholars have devoted their life’s work to—that is, defining religion in a way that lends respectful and universal parameters to the subject. I was deeply impressed by just how much astute objectivity and dedication the task seemed to require. In many cases, my incredulousness gave way to amusement as I read the resultant “definitions” of some of the most luminous scholars including the likes of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger, Paul Tillich and Robert S. Ellwood. For example, in his book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim states, “In reality there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence…” (*Elementary Religious Life* 3). Perhaps that statement, along with the scholarship of the many brilliant sociologists whose work I have cited here, can be taken as a direct confirmation of the Slow Food movement as religion, most especially since the Slow Food credo addresses one of the most basic “conditions of human existence”—our biological need to eat.

That said, as Durkheim is but one of the many scholars mentioned in this thesis who have brilliantly defined religion within a sociological construct, I did feel it necessary to offer a respectful and thoughtful compilation of the multiple definitions offered by those experts, uniquely pertinent to this work. The definition I crafted and have presented within these pages with mindful respect for those luminaries’ labor was:

Religion is a socially constructed, unified system of beliefs or practices that coalesces when a collective of people seek to satisfy the universally felt human craving for meaning, especially at a time when societal conflict makes the existing social structure dissatisfactory to that collective. It dedicates itself to the celebration of “sacred” things as a way of making
sense of life, however the content of such a faith may be secular as its orientation is not as important as its ability to uphold and celebrate whatever it is the collective deems to be sacred, or of primary importance.

With this broad-based definition in mind, as well as the foundational premise that humankind has long been sustained, satisfied and inspired by religion and food which are key elements in humanity’s search for meaning in life, it is logical to consider a food movement as a valid religion.

Should the importance of food in this equation need any further validation, let us consider that religion as we know it today is a relatively modern concept, and humanity’s fixation on food considerably predates the influence of organized religion on humankind. As John S. Haught writes in his book, *What is Religion?*, “The ancient world had no word for what we are calling religion, partly because religions blended so intimately with the rest of life and did not contrast sharply with profane or ordinary life the way it does today. It was not noticeable, perhaps because it was so pervasive” (2). In other words, it is our modern, secular sensibilities that make religious or sacred-seeming activity stand out more blatantly to us from what we consider to be the norm. Therefore, it is only because of this modern-day viewpoint that humankind has such a penetrating need to define food and the experience of eating as either sacred or secular—and as part of “normal” life, they are now more often relegated to the latter category. So, while contemporary attitudes tend to regard food and eating as mundane or fundamentally secular, this was not originally the case in the history of human experience.

The inception and rapid growth of the food movement seems to indicate a renewed recognition of the sacrosanct role that food holds for us in our lives. In fact, the
advent of Slow Food and its “Good, Clean and Fair” precepts is now becoming the catalyst for what may be a collective return to a way of life that does not so urgently necessitate a delineation between the sacred and the secular, but that once again regards all aspects of life as sacrosanct. As Durkheim might have observed, this phenomenon is a move on the part of the collective to elevate the civic morality of the entirety of society from profane to sacred. In fact, such reclamation of food’s original sacred significance would be a brilliant example of sociologist and religious scholar Mircea Eliade’s theory of the “Eternal Return.” Maintaining the dynamics of Durkheim’s dualism between the sacred and profane, Eliade’s theory puts forth that, in all religions, the power of a thing or its sacredness lies in its origin, and as a result, mankind is always compelled to elevate the profane in the present by making a “return” to that more meaningful and sacred time (Myth of Eternal Return 51-52). Is our current relationship to food in this moment of history guiding us toward a more sacred epoch ahead? That remains to be seen. What is amply evident, however, is that now, possibly more than ever in modern times, food holds immense meaning for a great many.

To thoroughly prove that the Slow Food movement can be compared to an emergent religion and has arguably begun to function as one, I dedicated Chapter III, Slow Food as an Emergent Religion, to a sound comparative analysis that highlights the many specific ways in which Slow Food embodies the four important characteristics of an emergent religion as put forth by Robert S. Ellwood.

In considering Ellwood’s first point—an emergent religion appears at a time of uncertainty—it is evident that, while perhaps every era has its measure of uncertainty, people the world-over are identifying this day and age as an especially unsettling time,
particularly after the 2016 United States presidential election. Not only are citizens feeling marginalized but they are also concerned about the environment, the world’s economy and sociopolitical unrest. These fears have people looking for solace and the food movement is one entity in which they are finding it, not to mention the many activists who are using food as a vehicle with which to protest injustices and take back power from corrupt corporate or political interests that they feel taken advantage by. In this, Slow Food is the preeminent entity—the “North Star”—within the larger food movement offering a clear alternative solution to the chaos of today’s world. Its slow and deliberate philosophy that emphasizes the importance of growing, preparing and eating food with intentionality appeals to the masses in its stark contrast to the pervasive mayhem dominating the global news cycle.

Ellwood’s second characteristic of an emergent religion—*tradition becomes “new” by taking on some new focus making it unique*—resonates deeply with Slow Food’s mission to halt the influence of fast life through deliberate experiences of sensory pleasure. According to Ellwood, an emergent religion becomes particularly successful in rising to the fore if it offers potential adherents a new practice or approach that is very unique. The more crisp, simple and distinct the solution, the better. By pitting itself against the proliferation of fast food and standing in opposition to everything the industrialized food system represents, the Slow Food movement has established a distinct brand for itself. Its name, motto of “Good, Clean and Fair” and mascot of the snail all contribute to its public appeal, as does its unique focus on pleasurable consumption which promises to bear a more genuine, fulfilling experience. This Slow Food approach to life is essentially dusting off and reintroducing traditional knowledge of food,
agriculture and conviviality to a modern audience, making it not only relevant again, but seemingly of dire importance to the future of humanity.

Ellwood’s third characteristic of an emergent religion—*it involves a charismatic leader who is central in the development of the religion*—is one that Slow Food certainly has. Carlo Petrini, who might be considered the heart and soul of Slow Food, arguably founded the movement on his charisma alone. He counts among his coworkers manifold lifelong friends who both admire and support him, his vision for Slow Food and the worldwide eco-gastronomic entity that it has become. His authenticity and genuine, public enthusiasm has garnered hundreds of thousands of disciples, some of whom are extremely influential and notable in their own right. From his youth to this very day, Petrini has repeatedly demonstrated an unsurpassed knack for cultivating a following. His supreme magnetism has been attested to again and again by the impassioned Slow Food community and, perhaps not coincidentally, it has become common for followers, friends and publications alike to refer to him as something of a prophet.

Ellwood’s fourth and final distinguishing characteristic of an emergent religion—*it emphasizes the future, looking ahead to better times*—is one that Slow Food also consistently shares. Through a plethora of forward-thinking and vision-driven initiatives, the Slow Food movement offers a multitude of tangible ways for people of all means to take arms and contribute to a more just, sustainable and gratifying world. A revolutionary commitment to the future—borne out of and driven forward by Petrini’s own affinity for activism—is central to many of these initiatives, and sustains within the movement a sense of renewed optimism and often celebration. This is significant for those who feel otherwise disenfranchised or marginalized, and who care deeply about the planet.
Inspired by Slow Food’s vision for a better tomorrow, these citizens of the world adopt a belief in the possibility of radical and groundbreaking change.

The concept of Slow Food as religion is particularly impactful when we consider the important vehicle it has become in helping its followers transcend the uniformity of the mundane by elevating the importance of tradition and advocating reverence for all of life through the daily act of eating. It is because of this easy-to-grasp and universally appealing approach that Slow Food has not only garnered thousands of followers worldwide, but has actually begun to influence other, more mainstream faiths in substantial ways. People already subscribed to a certain religion are increasingly looking to the food movement for greater connectivity, solace and a sense of purpose in these times of change. Indicative of this are the multiple venues within all faiths that are incorporating popular aspects of the food movement into their traditional forms of worship. These are manifold and diverse, centering not only on food and the environment, but in some cases on the very principles that comprise the Slow Food ethos. A Christian initiative, Slow Church, in admiration and emulation of the Slow Food movement, has positioned itself as the antidote to “franchised faith” which it perceives as an extension of the same fast life epidemic plaguing the world’s food systems. Slow Church is catching on across the United States and adding congregations to its fold rather expeditiously. This illustrates, along with a myriad of other examples including Dinner Church, The Institute of Mindful Agriculture, Hazon, Maharishi University’s Vedic Agriculture and the Islamic Beyond Halal movement, that food is fast taking on a more central and modern role in organized faith than has yet to be seen in contemporary iterations of religion.
In the foregoing chapters, I have explored the religious dimensions of the Slow Food movement illustrating how it now functions as a religion in its own right. What I have learned through my extensive research into this topic has exceeded my wildest expectations. It has opened up a clear path of discovery for me, especially into the sociology of religion, that has led me to experience many a personal revelation—some of which I hope have come across in this writing. While investigating with sincere inquisitiveness and open-mindedness, I found it possible to grasp the universal value of religious study more deeply and to discover why, cross-culturally, such study is invaluable in helping to bridge the divide between individuals and nations. I also discovered it is possible to maintain a wider, more objective view of religiosity while actually studying a secular community that has none of the bias and history of traditional religious precepts. I was better able to clearly see the markings and workings of religion by studying a collective of people who emulate multiple aspects of an emerging faith yet formally maintain that they themselves, their sacred nomos and their leaders are not religious in any way. Given that perspective, I am all the more heartened by my choice in using the Slow Food movement as my subject in this study. I believe that I have not only shed light on a global cultural phenomenon, but have also contributed a new perspective to the study of the sociology of religion which can help to demystify the origins and enduring influence of religions as they exist today in our world.

For decades, many prominent social scientists have anticipated the eventual and complete demise of religion. Surely, they have hypothesized, secularism would eventually overtake the need for “superstition”—and most likely sooner than later. Yet, despite this consensus among scholars, the human need for religion persists. Rodney
Stark and William Sims Bainbridge suggest in their book, *The Future of Religion*, “the vision of a religionless future is but illusion”. They instead see the movement toward secularization as “a major trend” and a normal, expected process found in the growth of all religions—something that “is always going on in all societies.” In this way, Stark and Bainbridge acknowledge the trend of religions becoming “progressively more worldly… more secularized” as necessary because religions are dynamic (Stark & Bainbridge 1). This is what we have seen evidenced in the evolution and establishment of Slow Food as an emergent religion. Perhaps, Slow Food is at the fore of a burgeoning trend of secularized faith, most especially if, as we have seen historically, society innately gravitates toward a more sacrosanct experience of life, one that incorporates purpose and meaning into all aspects of existence.

What I have been ultimately led to discover through my studies is humankind’s universal passion for finding ways to overcome the frustrations of human limitations—a passion for truth and a determination to derive meaning from even the most common of things. That is quite possibly what ignited the impulse within Carlo Petrini to bring order to what he perceived as chaos and what inspired his original Slow Food call to arms. Each grand Terra Madre event, each convivia that is convened, each slowly savored meal is a pause in the rush and hustle of life—an opportunity to make the profane sacred and experience a moment of timeless grace befitting of a saint. Michael Pollan has been quoted as saying, “the food movement is really a communitarian movement” (Pinsker). It is communion and a true sense of fulfillment that we all seek. That is what imbues the Slow Food movement with the fervor it has today, and the committed belief that there is sanctity waiting to be unearthed in even so simple a thing as food.
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