



**FRESNO METRO MINISTRY**

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Excerpts and Summary of the 49<sup>th</sup> Community Hunger and Nutrition Forum

Wednesday, November 10 12:00PM –1:30PM

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MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

California Food Policy Advocates

**FOCUS: *Thanksgiving- and Holidays***

**Faith Traditions, Food, and Charitable Actions**

The following is a summary of the reports made at the forum compiled by Jeremy Hofer and Carey Berend.

### **Hunger and Nutrition Forum Wednesday, November 10, 2004**

**Edie Jessup:** This is the 49<sup>th</sup> Hunger and Nutrition Forum. Today we are going to focus on Thanksgiving, which is this month, after all. I love living here in Fresno where the cultural diversity and the religious diversity is so rich. **We farm in 100 different languages and we eat in 100 different languages and it is really a blessing to us that we have this interesting place to live.** The other thing that I have been struck by is that practically **every faith tradition has tradition around food.** In some faith traditions there are admonitions around certain foods that people do not eat for a whole variety of reasons. Even in our society today we find that people are eating more and more vegetarian because of the chronic diseases such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes as a result of the kinds of foods that we are consuming. There is probably some great wisdom in some of the faith traditions around food. **Food also plays a part in the mythology and the liturgy of different religions.** For instance, in the Christian tradition the communion is a meal. It is a table feast with much interest in terms of its symbolism. In other religions food plays a really direct piece of the faith tradition, and certainly our charitable actions are formed by our faith. That part of it is also very interesting to me at the holiday time. Thanksgiving is a time when **we do think of those who are less fortunate than we are.** We often do food drives. We want to see that people have that meal on their table to celebrate in their own homes or celebrate in community with other people the thankfulness that we have for the bounty and the plenty that we actually have. **I am always very concerned about the day after Thanksgiving** because those same people are hungry the next day and the next. I'm very interested in not only our willingness to contribute food and make sure that people have something to eat, but also that as a society we take a look at how we can see to it that people are able to eat with great dignity until such time as the work of their hands accrues to them and puts food on their table reliably. I have been thinking about this for years and I am so delighted to have such a rich diversity of faith communities here today to tell us a little bit about who they are and the place that food plays in their religious path.

I'm going to ask in turn each of our speakers today to come up and talk to you a little bit about faith traditions, food, and charitable actions. This is an interfaith dialogue. The speakers will be available for questions following their presentations. I'd like to introduce Mindy Sandhu from the Sikh community.

**Mindy Sandhu, Sikh Religion:** Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It's my pleasure and my honor to be here this afternoon. I'm Mindy Sandhu. I was born in Nairobi, Kenya in East Africa, and we've been here for the last 11 years. I would like to give a little bit of background to the Sikh religion so that it will be easier to understand where the food comes into it. We have ten gurus. The first guru, Guru Nanak Dev, was born in 1469 in India and the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was born in 1666. **We have a holy book called the Guru Granth Sahib** and this Guru Granth Sahib has all the teachings of the gurus in it. The first time it was compiled was in 1604 by the fifth guru, so he took the teachings of the first four gurus and put them in the book and called it the holy book. The last guru, the tenth guru, took the teachings of the next four gurus and added them into the book called the Guru Granth Sahib. Guru means a teacher, so if you hear the word guru we don't look upon them as gods. We look upon them as gurus, or teachers. **The tenth guru said that after him there will be no persons called gurus, so the embodiment of all the gurus will be in the holy book,** the Guru Granth Sahib. There are no gurus as such, no human beings, that we worship now. What we worship is the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. We say "You will be guided by the Guru Granth Sahib." That's basically the background.

**Guru Nanak started the free kitchen in India. The free kitchen is called Langaar.** That's sharing of food, and those who came to worship he made sure that they had food before they came in. The third guru went further. He said "Before you come to pray you sit down, eat food, and then you come". And they all sat in rows together so that there was no class, color, distinction, position, or status. **How can someone worship if they're hungry?** They're thinking there, they're sitting there, but their mind is somewhere else. They cannot concentrate. They will not be able to pray properly. This free kitchen actually became a place for training in service and practice of equality. **Guru Nanak stressed that all human beings are brothers and sisters, so we should share with other people.** We should work hard. When we work hard whatever we make we should share it with other people. **During the second and the third guru these kitchens became free for everyone, not only the people who came to worship but other people who were hungry, so they came to these free kitchens to eat.** The Sikhs contribute willingly from their earnings for the maintenance of the free kitchen. **You can go anywhere in the world and wherever there is a Sikh temple you're assured of a meal, and this meal is any time. You don't have to pay for it.** The free kitchens provide the community, again, with an opportunity to service. That is, the people go and buy things, collect them, cook the food, serve, and then clear up, so that is a service. Part of hospitality means sharing of food with others. The Sikhs believe that the food and water belong to God. The desire to serve gives pleasure to the Sikhs. The food is served in India in all the Sikh temples day in and day out and hundreds of people, rich, poor, hungry, they are served food daily. The food is taken to different ashrams as well, to different orphanages and to different places and different charities as well. In Nairobi we used to cook food twice a month and take it to different charities, and for those people who could not eat our food we would take the groceries for them, so it was the thing to do it. Our tenth guru set up free kitchens wherever he went and he said, "Keep the kitchen ever open. Everything shall be offered by the blessings of God. **There is nothing equal to the supply of food. Blessed is a man who gives to the hungry.** Let no one fix a time for the exercise of this virtue. It is not necessary to consider whether it is night or day, nor is it necessary to look into the social position of the one wanting food. Avoid all delays in such a matter. Charity is the greatest of all gifts, for it saves life." A Sikh is community-oriented in outlook. The practice of sharing and helping those in need has made Sikhs support different types of welfare projects wherever they have settled. Charity is not only a duty but also means of sharing and caring for any human being in need. Edie, I'm very impressed with everything here and I'd like to get some more information so we can see how our temple can come and help with this. Thank you very much.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you very much. . I'd like to introduce Caroline Zutler from Temple Beth Israel and the Jewish faith.

**Caroline Zutler, Jewish Religion:** Thank you. I was a little bit nervous when Edie asked me to do this because I'm a Jew by choice. I thought, "Oh my, do I really know enough?" When I finished my

conversion process the rabbi said, "You don't have a license. You just have a learners permit." It's this lifelong thing. So that meant I had to go do research, go online. I went to **MAZON** to get information about the Jewish perspective on charity and food and since I did the research you have to listen to me read this. I'm going to tell you first a few of the Torah texts that our practice is developed from. A lot of it comes from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Leviticus 19, I think probably many people from the Christian faith are also familiar with this: **"When you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest, and you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger. I am Adonai, your god."** The short one is from Isaiah: "And the work of tzedakah shall bring peace". Proverbs: Tzedakah exalts a nation. One rabbi said tzedakah is equally important as all the other mitzvot, or commandments, put together. There are certain things that delight me about being Jewish and the attitude about food and about charity is one of them. Actually, I don't like the word charity. I think it has taken on kind of a pejorative feeling of something that we're doing for someone less than us and that we get to feel good because we did it. The word **tzedakah gets translated as charity but it actually means justice or righteousness, so the concept of giving in Judaism is that it's the right thing to do and it's not about personal redemption or self-opinion.** It's about doing it because we're commanded to do it. We have levels of how good a person you are in terms of tzedakah. We are into judging ourselves. **The best gift is the anonymous gift. That has the most value. Also, no matter how poor, even if you are a receiver of tzedakah, you are required in turn to give to someone who has less than you.**

There is a little story that I found that I thought was very good. It's about a disciple of a rabbi who boasted that he had converted an unbelieving Jew, and the rabbi said, "How did you do this?" and he said, "Well, you know, a poor man knocked at my door and he was hungry and he wanted food so I welcomed him in. Then I said, 'You know, first we have to pray the Minchah, the afternoon prayers,' and we prayed and then I told him we had to pray the Ma'ariv, which are the evening prayers, and then after that we finally went to the table but I told him we had to wash our hands and recite the blessing over washing our hands and then the blessing over the bread. "Well, then what happened?" the rabbi asked. "Well, he fainted and so I revived him and then we prayed some more." The rabbi thought and told him, "Son, you've done the wrong thing." And he said, "But rabbi, he blessed God. What did I do wrong?" and the rabbi said, "You should have acted as if there were no God." "But rabbi," he said, "that's atheism." He said, "Well, God created everything for a purpose and atheism has its purpose. When a person comes to you in need you act as if there is no God in the world, no angel, no heavenly intervention. You act as if there is no one in the world but you, yourself." The disciple said, *"But what about saving his soul?"* and the rabbi said, *"Save your own soul and his body, not vice versa."* I liked that and I like the word tzedakah, and I think it's a good reminder to me. It leads into the whole Jewish perspective of **tikkun olam, which is repair of the world.** Just like someone saying she was representing the Christians, there is a wide spectrum of Judaism. I'm not representing necessarily all viewpoints, but the belief that I have is that, again, it's our responsibility to repair the world, not for our salvation and redemption in the next world but because that is the way we bring the messiah or bring the messianic age. That's kind of the overview of how we look at it. I'd be glad to answer questions afterwards. Thank you.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you, Caroline. I'd like to introduce to you Onehawk Hirajeta who will speak to us from his faith tradition and his cultural tradition as Native American.

**Onehawk Hirajeta, Native American Religion:** My name is Onehawk and I'm a Native American Comanche by trade. I like to say that. I'm from the plains and we like our meat. The meal is good, it's fantastic, but meat is always a thing of pleasure on our table. Food for us has always been a very important thing and it's been a very important thing in our tradition to always, always be thankful for it. I've heard it on television and I've seen it in stories and I'm here to tell you that it's true. **Every day, every time we sit down to eat, it is Thanksgiving.** As I'm saying that, I'm reminded of some of the things that we did wrong in my culture because of food. An old gentleman talked to me when I was 13

years old and he said, "How do you feel about the white man?" and I said, "Well, I dislike him just the way all our people dislike him." He said, "You know, you're prejudging." I said, "Whatever." I was a kid, 13 years old. He began to tell me a story about Thanksgiving. I thought it was going to be a story of a multitude of food and all our brothers and sisters sitting down at a table and eating and enjoying the good food. But he told me that a long time ago before him, a group of young men crawled over the top of a hill listening to wagons and noises on the other side of the hill, and they spied three wagons and a group of people. They looked tired and so they thought, "Tomorrow we'll see about going to meet them." So they went back and told the camp about them. They followed to where they were and they noticed that where they had been there were a couple of young buffalo that had been slain and had been massacred pretty bad. I mean, they just took them and chopped them up and ate what they could and left the rest. One young man appeared and he said, "Yes, I saw them do that and they were not even thankful for their food. They just grabbed a buffalo, shot the buffalo, and just yanked pieces off of him and ate it like animals." And so the young men all got very upset and they followed the train down to where they were and they killed every man, woman, and child. It wasn't until it was over that they realized that they had done something wrong because they looked around and they didn't find any water in their water barrels, they didn't find any rice in their rice buckets, they didn't find any kind of food, any breads, any kind of food at all, just the pieces of bones and things from the buffalo. They noticed that the men's bellies were protruding, coming out like they'd been starved and they'd eaten all of a sudden, and that's when the young men kind of knelt down and asked the Creator for forgiveness because they had killed people because they had not been thankful. **This made them want to be thankful for everything they picked up. If they picked up a blade of grass they gave something in return.** If they picked up sage, if they picked up something to wear on their clothing, anything, to wash their hands, they were thankful for it.

When he told me that story it still kind of affects me a little, but it also reminds me of how important things are in this world, especially food. Sometimes we're told that the Great Creator gives us everything that we have here, and **we're a group of people that choose to believe that He doesn't give us everything. He does not give us anything. The Creator God, Wanka Tanka is what we choose to call Him, which is the Great Mystery, doesn't give us anything. He didn't give us that food, He doesn't give us these chairs, He doesn't give us this microphone, He doesn't give us this time, He doesn't give us anything. He shares it with us. He made us keepers of all these things. We keep this world. We're managers of this world. We try to get our brothers and sisters to come together to help clean the water, to help feed those who are in need. We're not owners of this world. We're not owners of anything that we walk on, step on, breathe, or see. We're not owners of anything. It belongs to the Great Creator and we're only here to make sure that it keeps on going, that the air is always clean, that the waters are clean, that there is food for all of us and every one of us.** In the old days when hunting parties went out they hunted the buffalo and they never said, "No, this one is for my family." They never said that. It was for the whole community. Everybody shared. Everybody took a piece of it. **That's how it should be now. We should look at the foods that we have in our factories, the leftover foods, foods that are blemished, foods that are not going to be used for whatever reason or because we have too much. We should take those foods and share them with all the people, especially the elders, because the elders are important. They hold the secrets to where we're going.**

I wish I could talk to a million elders about where I'm going in my next 20 years. In our Indian prayer it says, "I seek strength and wisdom so that I can see the things that you have taught all our people, learn the lessons you have hidden underneath rocks and behind every leaf. Make my hands ready to respect the things that you have made and my eyes and my ears sharp to see you and hear your voice." That's something that to us is very, very important, and food is definitely at the top of our cultural traditions of Thanksgiving. **This is a special time for us, especially since there is an actual Thanksgiving ceremony that is held every year. We try at Four Winds Lodge to feed everyone,** not just the people that are poor, not just the people that are hungry, not just the people that are in need, but we feed everyone. It doesn't matter whether you roll up in a limousine or you roll up on a bike or just barely have shoes on your feet. It doesn't matter. We're going to scrape up the

food that we need to have Thanksgiving at Four Winds Lodge up in the mountains. We hope that we do have it and when we do we'll invite all of you. That's what Thanksgiving is to us. Thank you.

**Eddie Jessup:** Thank you. I'd like to invite Reverend Natalie Chamberlain from the Disciples of Christ.

**Reverend Natalie Chamberlain, Disciples of Christ, Christian Religion:** First I want to say how humbled I am to be asked to represent the Christian perspective, the Christian faith. As I mentioned to the people sitting at the table, the Christian faith embraces so many different ways of looking at faith. We have some things very much in common, but there is a lot of room for diversity. As Caroline was speaking I realized that it's not just the Christian faith that gives me foundations and roots. Looking at what I had prepared, the Hebrew scripture is very much a part of who we as Christians are. Disciples of Christ is a tiny denomination that was born here in the United States. It's the oldest American-founded Christian denomination and we were born on the frontiers when the frontiers were Pennsylvania. It was during the Great Awakening, the time in our country when the evangelical movement actually got started in the revivals that were going on in the camps on the frontiers; and so that's where we come from.

We're very much a Protestant denomination. We stand on what we call our scriptures, the Bible, which includes a new Testament as well as the Hebrew scriptures, but we vary a lot from most other Protestant denominations in that we hold a very close tie with our Catholic roots in that the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, are absolutely central to our form of worship.

**We do not meet in worship without celebrating the Communion around the Lord's Table, and so as a Protestant denomination with that kind of centrality of the table we cannot talk about what our faith means without talking about what food means.** Although the meal is symbolic, bread and wine are used. Those are symbols of Christ and therefore Christ's presence becomes absolutely central to every time we gather as a community. We are reminded at that table that it is not just the people who are physically present at that moment but it is every person who has ever sat down to that table, whether in the past or in the future, whether on earth or in heaven, that is part of that community around those emblems. In remembering that, we are reminded that those symbolize Christ. That is who is there in the midst of us, and His command to those who followed was that we are to love God with all of our being and love our neighbors as ourselves. There is a place in our scriptures in one of the gospels where Jesus is talking about that time when people will be judged for how they have lived their lives and will be separated out, and he calls those people blessed and says, "You will inherit the Kingdom of God prepared for you from the foundation of the world. *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*" Those he was speaking to spoke, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink, and when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing, and when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" and the king will answer them, "**Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.**" That becomes a foundational principle for the Christian faith, for any who truly wish to practice Christianity in the community. **All belong to the family of God, and how we treat any other person determines how we treat the one we call Savior. What we have, just as Onehawk said, isn't ours, it's something God has given us stewardship of,** and the way that we use those to touch the lives of the people around us determines how it is we live out the faith we claim to have. *It makes it very difficult when we live in abundance to be able to say we truly are Christian if we allow anyone, least or otherwise, to go without.* That is my understanding of how charity and the table fit into my perspective within Christian denominations.

**Eddie Jessup:** Thank you, Natalie. I am pleased to introduce the Imam Seyed Ali Ghanzvini.

**Imam Seyed Ali Ghanzvini, Islamic Faith:** It's my honor to be here with you. This is my first time to join this gathering, and I would like to thank Fresno Metro Ministry for organizing such events.

Speaking in the end has a little disadvantage because all the speakers tell whatever you want to say. Nothing left for those who would like to speak in the end. Well, charity has a very major position in the faith of Islam. I represent the Shi'a school of thought of Muslims. There are sectors, as in Christianity and Judaism, and I represent the Shi'a school of thought. **We have four different kinds of charities which are mandatory in our faith and one more which is recommended but not mandatory.** Very quickly I will mention these four kinds of mandatory religious charities in our faith. One type of charity is called a **Zakat**. Zakat is a general charity that every eligible Muslim has to pay, which is 2.5% a year on certain items of wealth such as gold, silver, cattle, and other forms of wealth. There is another kind of charity that is mandatory upon every eligible Muslim that is called **Zakat al-Fitr**, which has to be paid after one month of fasting, one month of Ramadan. We are currently in the month of Ramadan. At the end of this month every head of family has to pay for himself and other members of his family about \$6 to \$12 per person as a charity. *It depends on the major foods every family consumes the year long.* It depends what kind of food. They have to pay equivalent to the major food they consume, so it varies. The third kind of charity, which is only practiced in the Shi'a school of thought, is called **Khums**. They pay 20% of the excess of profit and surplus of their income a year to the needy, the less fortunate of the community. **All forms of charity go to the less fortunate of the community except the Khums**, which is the third one. *Half of it goes to the less fortunate and half goes to the religious organizations such as mosques and other nonprofit organizations.* The fourth form of charity is meant to make up for the sins or wrong actions or wrong doings some Muslims might commit. *It is a fine that they have to do in the form of food or something equivalent to food, something equivalent to the price of food, to the less fortunate.* We call it **kaffara**, and those are paid in cases of someone that breaks an oath or breaks an ordained fast or some other actions. Also, those are paid for the less fortunate. Those were four types of mandatory religious dues. In addition to that there is a recommended charity which we call **sadaqat**. It is the same, I think, name that is being used in Hebrew, **tzedakah**. The translation of **sadaqat** is charity, and every Muslim is recommended to pay this at different times. However, leaders and the Islamic text say that whoever pays **sadaqat**, *God would provide him with protection against calamity and hardship so every Muslim is recommended to pay sadaqat at different times, like every morning when he or she goes to work, at times of sickness, having a new home or new baby. At different times this sadaqat is recommended, and it also it goes to the less fortunate.* It is mentioned in the Holy Quran more than 50 times and it is always associated with the prayers. Whenever the word prayer is mentioned in the Quran it is followed by the name **Zakat** or **sadaqat** at other times, and this is to teach Muslims that the **prayers are associated with giving and your prayers will be accepted if you provide some giving and sharing with others.**

Our religious leaders say if your income is not good and you want your income to be more and to grow then pay charity, so charity is not only recommended for the wealthy of the community, it is recommended even for those who are less fortunate, and they use a very wonderful analogy. **They say when you trim a tree it grows more and it provides more fruit so if you want your income to grow just share what you have, even if it is less. Our holy book, the Quran, tells us that we need to thank God, and if we thank God, God will give us more, and thanking God is not only by saying, "Thank you, Lord," it is by sharing what Lord has given us with others by providing material support to others and sometimes maybe intangible support. Sharing your knowledge, your time, or your energy is considered a charity also.** This is a very brief and basic teaching of Islam. Thank you.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you, Imam. I'd like to introduce Veena Kapoor, who will speak to us briefly about the Hindu faith and food and charity.

**Veena Kapoor, Hindu Religion and Brahma Kumaris:** Greetings of peace. I was asked to speak on Hindu faith. I was born and raised as a Hindu so I certainly can address that, but my commitment today is to spirituality, to make a simplified explanation, to new age, new thought, the pure essence of Hinduism, which is an organization that began about 68 years ago. It's called **Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual Organization**, so I really represent that. We have a meditation center in our home.

We are a small group here but our centers are throughout the world. I need to distinguish that so that I can get a better way of explaining and helping you relate to what I have to say. Being raised in Hinduism I do want to point out a couple of things that really highlights the importance of charity as well as the basic belief of Hinduism. **A lot of people would have heard about the worship of different gods and goddesses in Hinduism, but Hinduism is a monotheistic religion and believes only in one God.** There are a lot of scriptural writings as a testimony to that. So what is this about gods and goddesses that are worshipped so much? The gods and goddesses really represent certain attributes that are associated with them. The worshiper then chooses to have a personal relationship with a god that they feel they most identify with, and that becomes their mentor. Those attributes that the deity represents becomes their spiritual inspiration. But all the literature and the philosophy alludes to the oneness of one God. All the gods and goddesses you see are obviously in human form, so they are all divine beings and they're referred to as deities.

Amongst them there is a deity called **Annapurna, and she is the goddess of food. The word Annapurna means "the one who fulfills completely the needs of individuals."** When we say that it is not just the material needs, the physical needs, the bodily needs, but the needs of the soul, *because of her attributes of giving, her compassion, she can reach out to everyone so that no one is left thirsty, not only for food but also in terms of their spiritual needs for virtues and values.*

Growing up as a Hindu I knew about the goddesses but I really didn't get to appreciate the depth of the meaning until I became a student of **Brahma Kumaris**, and in my practice I always, every day consistently engage in meditation. Our teachings are based really on spiritual values and how we practice them, so I'm able to link now with some of the symbolism that is there in Hinduism that even defies most educated Hindus, but I feel really privileged that I can now appreciate that more. **The importance of food is such in Hinduism, as well as in my present practice, that the food is not just for the body. The food is really for the soul because I'm a spiritual being.** We are all spiritual beings living in this physical body, so I need to really be sure that what I eat is something that would be nourishing and pure and healthy food for the body and the mind. If you see yourself as a spiritual being consider yourself living in a temple. You're residing in the temple that is this body. How would you treat a temple, a place of worship? You wouldn't throw any rubbish in it. So that is the consciousness that has been created. In the present time, particularly in my present practice, that is highly emphasized every single day.

I did bring a little handout on consciousness while cooking and eating, and anybody who is interested can pick it up later. **It should be that I am peaceful, I'm calm, while cooking because there are vibrations created. Vibrations are just energy that reaches the food.** The same food, I'm sure we all have that experience, made in a hurry one evening after work, and the same item you cook on the weekend when you're relaxed, tastes different. **What you cook and serve others is a very important service because you're feeding not the body but also the soul this way, so the more your thoughts are of peace and purity, you give that to others.** That's a very important intangible service that can be done in this way. So what I eat and what I cook nurtures both my body and my mind.

I want to touch a little bit on vegetarianism. **Hindus, as a rule, predominantly are vegetarians. There are many Hindus who do eat meat, but if you see in their diet it's a small part of their diet,** maybe two or three times a week or one item. The rest of it is vegetarian. Many of my Muslim friends in India, when they eat it's just one item, the rest is all vegetarian food. The same goes with many of my Sikh friends. I was thinking that many of them watch whatever they eat, and they remember the God and eat. But when it comes to offering worship, offering food to God or using food for the purpose of worship, there is never any meat offered. It's always vegetarian. The real understanding about vegetarianism is that as we came into this world we were not carnivorous. We were vegetarians. We relied primarily on edible fruits and berries to survive. Later on needs demanded eating different foods, and many cultures that have already shared before me described how they pray before even killing the animals, so that also signifies the importance of life. I don't want to offend anyone here, but I'm just expressing the belief that human beings are gifted with intellect, and in animals there may be many powerful emotions, particularly when an animal is killed and then that meat is consumed there could be certain emotions of anger, of violence, that through the

vibrations can be transmitted in your own food, in your own cooking. This may be arguable, but my own experience has been, since about 15 years of my practice of meditation I've found that I gave up over time certain foods. I experimented a lot because I didn't fully buy this, and **I found that it did make a difference in the state of mind and I felt calm and peaceful mentally when I avoided and refrained from certain foods.** Those who have adapted here following what I practice have shared the same experience, so there is some validity in these beliefs.

Going back to **what charity then means and how we perform charity, again, with this understanding that when we are helping others we are helping them not only to nurture their bodies but nurture their souls.** The Hindi word for deities is **devta**, and it literally means **“one who gives selflessly.”** What **Annapurna** stood for as a goddess of food is not just what was given as food. What she gave demonstrated her actions to be compassionate, merciful, cooperative, so that's what we can share and give to others, and the more we share the more we get. So it is a really important aspect. **The Hindi word also for charity is punya.** Charity doesn't even convey the full meaning of punya. **Punya means the total well-being of the individual,** so we have the word **punyatma, which means charitable soul.** To become that is the highest honor.

Charity is very much a practice among Hindus, and Hinduism is a way of life for many people in India, so when anyone comes to your door you don't refuse them. Whatever you have you give, you share. I do remember growing up in Bombay, and that was a time of division of India, independence of India and the partition of the country. Many Hindus had to leave from what is now Pakistan homeless and many ended up in the area where we were. Many times my father, who was a teacher in the university, would bring some students who were poor and had not eaten and here my mother had to go back into the kitchen and start cooking all over again. But I never heard her ever complain. We were little girls then so we used to get frustrated with the amount of time she would spend in the kitchen, but she was always ready and willing to give, even if it meant the whole day being in the kitchen because of having to give. These are just personal examples to share with you how giving takes place. Even a few years ago when there was a major earthquake in India, and it made worldwide news, a lot of help came from other countries as well as from within the country. Our organization also joined hand in reaching out, going to the villages and giving a lot of help. The one help that we gave that we got singled out for was serving the soul because we were reaching out to the people and enabling them to experience peace and calmness in spite of the loss and devastation that they were personally experiencing. It was a different kind of giving. That is what I have to share at the moment. Thank you.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you, Veena. Morghan Young will talk to us briefly about the Buddhist faith and Soka Gakkai.

**Morghan Young, Buddhist Religion:** I've been practicing Buddhism my entire life. I was born into a Buddhist family, and it was when I was 16 that I decided to dive into study and daily practice. I practice **Nichiren Buddhism with the International Lay Buddhist Peace Organization, the Soka Gakkai International.** The SGI, the Lay Buddhist Peace Organization, has three pillars, which are peace, cultural understanding, and education. The lay organization promotes these three things in the world. We are an official NGO with the United Nations so we can help on a large scale and on local community scales also.

How do we see food from our faith perspective? **Enough to eat is the right of everyone and to withhold the supply of food to manipulate people is absolutely horrendous, such as sanctions and embargoes.** It is inhuman to withhold these things and it is the responsibility of us as human beings to make sure that doesn't happen and that the supplies of food do get to people, so it is a responsibility of all of us.

**How does faith inform our charity? From the Buddhist faith we work directly to help with the distribution of food to people locally and abroad.** Some people may have the misconception that Buddhism is a mountaintop religion, but in fact the first historic Buddha was not a mountaintop teacher. He walked among the people, he worked with the people, and he based his life on empowerment. It wasn't to become a celebrity or popular. He was giving an example that **all human beings have the potential to empower others and empower their environment.** It is important to work with well-meaning groups and find common ground to help people in the world instead of debating which faith is the most correct.

In Nichiren Buddhism we do our human revolution so that we can have enough energy and determination in a humanistic way to **bring people to the awareness that a life of consuming, SUVs, and TVs is not a fulfilling life and that in fact the contributory life is really a happy life. It is also important to direct our energies to improve the philosophy of government and to inspire people to understand the importance of moving towards humanism in our individual lives and internationally,** where the animal-like behavior of greed no longer exists. Thank you very much.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you. Reverend Ken Smiley, the United Community Fellowship Church.

**Reverend Ken Smiley, Christian Religion, United Community Fellowship Church:** While there are certainly some differences denominationally between Reverend Chamberlain and myself, the tenants of Christianity are the same. We all are at the table where we share in the blood and the body of Jesus Christ. It is important for us because in that we show commemoration of the time that Jesus himself indeed did shed his blood for us and his body was broken for us as well, and therefore I don't have very much to add with regard to that. Amen!

With regard also to the African American church I do have some things to talk about. One thing I'd like to start out talking about is the perception of the African American Christian religion as being a religion that was forced on the African American community by the white settlers in our community. And of course, that is true. But if you study the West African history then you will understand that it was a great deal more intricate than that. When this God was being placed upon those folk who were enslaved, there was a reason for the embracing of this God. **In the Ashante religion, as a matter of fact, on the West Coast of Africa, there is High God, and High God is a god that no one can connect with, but between High God and man or woman is a mediation God, Ashante (s/I Heni).** The **Ashante (Henri)** is the person who then does in fact take mediation for the human to High God. When Christianity was being given to Africans who were enslaved, then the embracing of that God became as the African who embraced High God. It was a god that he couldn't touch. **High God was someone who could not be touched, could not be thought of, but Jesus, on the other hand, was someone who could be touched,** and therefore the mediation between God and the African slave was Jesus. **Thus, Christianity became an excellent opportunity for the African slave to reconnect with his roots.**

Historically in the African American church, **service has been the plow that has guided all that we do.** James A. Joseph, who is the author of Black Philanthropy, says that at the center of the African American connection is the overwhelming belief that God links the African American community with humanity. As we celebrate Jesus saying at the end of time, "I knew you because you fed the poor," we also celebrate that **Jesus said in Luke 4 that our position is that we should make sure that hungry are fed and poor folk are made well again and that those who are sick are administered to.** So it is service within the African American community that has always been there. If you were to come to our churches then you will **celebrate food in the African American churches at all important meetings.** It is a very important staple for anniversaries and church celebrations and for any old reason that you can make up to bring some food in. In fact, in churches such as my own I know the folk who cook and what they cook, and in most of our churches it's a great deal like that. **Food is important. It connects us.** We are connected in the church not only just with worship but we are connected in a psychological and a financial and educational and even a basic humanistic way in the African American church. I don't doubt that this is true within all faiths and all

churches, but I know particularly within the African American church that folk are helped with housing, helped with food, or helped with daily kinds of situations that they find themselves in. That **care-giving is quite an important piece for the African American church and in the African American tradition**. It is said that during illnesses and during times of despair that within the African American church the giving is second only to the family's own giving. So, we believe that people really ought to share in life's substances with each other. Everything that we do is generated from that service piece so that we might serve community in all aspects in every way that we can serve community so that in fact we look for that time when God does say, "When I was hungry you fed me," **because we don't know who we might be feeding**. I think that one of the things that motivates the churches that I have been a member of and that is that you really can't beat God giving. Because you can't beat God giving then you ought to really try to give more because the more you give then the more God really gives back, and so you continue to give. You continue to try to do that so that **you understand the abundance of God's wonder and the abundance of God's love through the giving that you have done yourself**. Thank you.

**Edie Jessup:** Thank you, Ken. Reverend Jessup, would you say a few words for Unitarian Universalism?

**Reverend Bryan Jessup, Unitarian Universalist Religion:** I am a Unitarian Universalist. The Unitarian Universalist Association is an outgrowth of the old Puritan tradition in this country up in the Northeast. We are a non-literal, progressive interpretation of the Christian faith and we have attempted to get to the essence of things. We are not held together by a creed, **we're held together by a covenant, an agreement**. That agreement actually historically is based on the great commandment, which is the central prayer of Judaism: **Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself**. Well, what's the essence of that? Unitarian Universalists say the essence of that is the way we live. The way we live speaks so loudly it matters not what we say. So we say we have a covenant. **We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our society and in the world at large. We covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for everyone. We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part**. One of the longest names for God you'll ever hear, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We covenant to affirm and promote a respect for that web of being.

What does it mean to say you're going to love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself? This is our thought about what it means. It means that we will covenant to affirm and promote these values in our living. The Unitarian Universalist religion grew in the Northeast of our country. It grew out of the Puritans. The puritans held sway in the foundation of the country. The founding institutions of our country were contributed to greatly by our forebears. Our forebears were rich, wealthy white people, *and from those to whom much has been given much will be required*. We're not happy with how the world has turned out and with the job we've done. **We're gathered here today still talking about a basic human right to food. The system that our forebears tried to create is so imperfect that it's totally out of balance, and cutthroat hyper-competition keeps people from having their basic human needs met**. Haughty folks will say, "Tell people to go to work." Well, people do go to work and the work of their hands does not come back to them because their work is not honored. Who they are in the web of things is not honored and their contribution is not honored. We say that is unjust and unfair and it's our duty to swim against the tide of our system, so you'll find that if there is a protest the Unitarian Universalists are there because we feel responsible, because we played a big role in setting this whole game up and it's gone awry, and so it is both love and guilt that motivates us and it keeps us busy. I'll close with one of the poems from our hymnal. Our religion at this point in terms of sources of inspiration is eclectic. We draw from many sources. Our hymnal is always a living example of what the Unitarian Universalists are reading now, so this is one of our

hymns. **“Oh beautiful, my country, be thine a nobler care than all the wealth of commerce, and harvests waving fair. Be it thy pride to lift up the hungry and the poor. Be thou to the oppressed ones, fair freedom’s open door.”** We’re working to open that door and to keep it open even now. That’s our relationship to food and Thanksgiving and charity. *Our emphasis is much more systemic change than charity.*

**Eddie Jessup:** Thank you. I would like to open the forum to any questions you might have of any specific folks who have talked to us or to all of them.

**Participant question:** How do you handle obesity in your sects, and also, what about meat? I’ve always felt meat is important, and I don’t know what religious basis some people have. Didn’t Christ eat meat?

**Reverend Natalie Chamberlain, Christian Religion:** I think I’ll address the meat first. I guess if Christ is considered the bread of life he was also the Lamb of God, so there you go. **Within the Christian tradition overdoing anything is sin, and yes, it’s an issue that we have to address.** Speaking as the pastor of a congregation my excess is just as much a sin as that of anyone in my congregation, so yes, it’s something we deal with regularly. It’s something that we have to deal with regularly. *We cannot with any kind of integrity speak about the issues that are around us if we don’t look first to ourselves and then to those of our congregation.*

**Reverend Ken Smiley, Christian Religion:** I think when you ask that question you have to ask that question with regard to what kind of **cultural background folk are coming from. In many cases and in many of our cultures children who are fat or plump are children who are thought to be healthy, and not just healthy, it’s also a sign that people have wealth.** So those kinds of things have been traditionally hailed by folk, and because of that, training or teaching about obesity will help, but that has to be something that we do in a systemic way.

**Participant comment:** I’d like to thank Ms. Zutler for pointing out that in your culture or your religion *you’re not to strip your harvest, which really rang for me because when I went over to the packing house and I was looking at what they do they strip everything.* And now they don’t even allow the poor or anyone to go and glean. Vena Kapoor, I noticed, too, as I’ve been meditating more and more that there are foods that I can’t participate in any more. My body does not feel well, and so then when there’s a situation that comes up I cannot remain calm and balanced, so I noticed that. Thank you.

**Reverend Bryan Jessup, Unitarian Universalist:** I had a response to the obesity question as well, and it goes into the whole thing about balance and the whole thing about gleaning and the whole thing about access to food. **There is an epidemic of obesity in children in our culture now and also directly linked to the epidemic of fast food, directly linked to the epidemic of parents so busy they don’t have time to come home and participate in the thoughtful, prayerful creation of meals like Vena was talking about. Seriously, if we don’t have the time to gather food and to prepare food thoughtfully and prayerfully our bodies and our spirits go to hell. They blossom out and bloom and we aren’t getting the right exercise, we aren’t getting the right mindfulness, and there is a direct link. It’s a justice issue because our society is so pressed and oppressed.** For those who are working so fast and so hard, the time to create meals is not there. For many people if you don’t have the right transportation access to healthy food, access to the food that might be gleaned, **access is really a difficult issue. So the obesity thing – of course, from a Unitarian Universalist point of view everything is social justice – it’s a social justice issue.**

**Eddie Jessup:** Thank you all. I want to thank all of our speakers tremendously for sharing with us and providing us a Thanksgiving. Thank you.