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“The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and passive”

(William Ralph Inge)

Course Description:

In every culture food lies at the center of a complex value system that involves religious beliefs and rituals, social hierarchies, and gender distinctions. Food is the cement that binds groups together, but it also separates individuals according to age, wealth, status, and gender. Far from a natural product, food is a social construction and can only be “read” in specific cultural contexts. For example, the great 19th century French historian Jules Michelet attributed the French revolution to the consumption of coffee, but today coffee signifies the rest and relaxation associated with “coffee breaks.” Food connects the living with the dead and even with the gods. While the food that mothers provide will keep one alive, only male food offers eternal life. Food taboos are a central aspect of ancient as well as modern cultures and religions. Why do some foods pollute and not others? What makes us cringe at the thought of eating grasshoppers and

worms, while other people relish both? And why are foods gendered, even eroticized? Finally, we are not only what we eat, but we are how we eat and how we produce, distribute, and consume the food we eat. What therefore are the effects of our modern industrial form of food production on the animals we raise and eat, on our environment, and on our own bodies? In this regard, as “chicken nugget” tells us a lot about modern food, modern life, and modern eating habits? It is the purpose of this course to introduce students to the varied ethical, religious, and cultural meanings food has had across the centuries and globe as well as its physical effects food production has on the environment, the animals raised to be eaten, and the people who eat it.