

The Sacred Foods Project

by Richard M. Clugston

The Sacred Foods Project, launched in the summer of 2005 by ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, is an interfaith effort to incorporate religious and ethical principles in food production, distribution, and consumption. Founding partners

joining ALEPH were Chicago-based Faith in Place, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and the Food Alliance. The Islamic Society of North America, the National Council of Churches, and the Presbyterian (USA) Hunger Program joined the founding partners as members of the Advisory Council early in the project. The Project is made possible by the support of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Schocken Foundation.

Sacred Foods brings together religious leaders and institutions, civic organizations, and food service providers concerned with protecting environmental quality, providing healthier and more sustainable food, treating animals humanely and improving the lives of agricultural workers. The Project focuses on the most central activity to our economy and environment, both domestic and international, since more than 1.3 billion people work 28 percent of the earth's land to grow food. In the United States alone, nearly a quarter of all workers are engaged in the food industry.

According to ALEPH Executive Director Debra Kolodny, "Twenty five years ago, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi coined the concept of *eco-kashrut*. In doing so he informed a generation about evaluating food and food production from a spiritual perspective for its healthfulness, its environmental impact, and its treatment of animals and workers.

"The Sacred Foods Project takes this idea and expands it to all faith traditions. It says that as people of faith we have a moral obligation to be good stewards of the earth. We must make sure that the way we grow and distribute food honors the land, the water, the air, our bodies and our souls. This Project will inform, inspire and enable leaders in faith-based communities to infuse our

society with a better approach to food, focusing on the realms of sustainable and organic agriculture, sound treatment of animals and honorable treatment of workers in food production. We believe that faith-based recommendations rooted in morality and social justice and informed by scientific and political realities will influence policy makers, religious institutions and people of faith, thereby permanently changing our food system for the better," said Ms. Kolodny.

In its first year, the Sacred Foods Project published a paper that integrated theology, scripture and religiously based analysis from the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths to provide a faith-based foundation for fostering a healthful and sustainable agriculture system. Edited by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, the paper was used as the foundation for discussion at the Project's first conference in June 2006. Participants discussed how the principles identified as the core of Sacred Food could be used to educate and activate religious institutions (seminaries, colleges, denominational organizations, etc.), congregational leadership (clergy and other professionally trained educators and spiritual leaders as well as lay leaders), and congregants (those in the pews) about issues like secular food certification standards and purchasing policy options as well as choosing food more con-

sciously for religious celebrations and holy days.

Quoting from the paper's introduction:

"The paper reviews the teachings of the three Abrahamic traditions in regard to the sacredness of food. It covers a wide spectrum of issues, organized by eight dimensions through which sacredness can be defined. In each of the eight dimensions, we draw for now on four sets of sources from the classic texts of the three traditions:

One of these is the Hebrew Bible, which defined the life of Biblical Israel but then, beginning about two thousand years ago, came to have a broader religious significance than simply a text of the Jewish people or Jewish religious thought. It was radically reinterpreted and kept as sacred canon by Rabbinic Judaism. It was radically reinterpreted and kept as sacred canon by Christianity. And it played an important role in the cultural and to some extent the religious background of the community in which the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, experienced the revelation of the Qur'an and lived the life described in the Sunnah (life example of prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). We draw on it, therefore, not as the text of any single tradition but as an important pointer toward the ideas about sacred food that appear in all three Abrahamic traditions.

The other three classic texts of the three traditions are the Talmud and other rabbinic writings, which began about two thousand years ago to define a new version of Jewish life—Rabbinic Judaism; the Christian Scriptures or New Testament, which have defined Christianity; the Qur'an and Sunnah, which have defined Islam. As

