

# FEASTING AT GOD'S TABLE

*father divine, conspicuous consumption & racial harmony*

BY MICHAEL KLEEN

Health and prosperity, in the American mind, has long been wedded to the consumption of food. More than anything else, it was the ability to eat what one wanted and when that defined an American family's ascent into the growing middle class at the dawn of the twentieth century. It was therefore no accident that there appeared in America during the 1920s a man who offered salvation through the act of eating. Father Divine, as he called himself, preached nothing less than his own divinity and urged his followers to transcend race and poverty through the power of positive thinking. His message crossed racial lines because he appealed to several shared traditions in American culture—first and foremost the tradition of conspicuous consumption, but also the ever-present undercurrent of religious fervor and the Protestant work ethic.

Father Divine's movement was at its height during The Great Depression. At a time when scarcity affected millions, this eccentric preacher offered men and women a taste of the American dream—for the price of personal sacrifice and loyalty. He provided Americans across the country, both black and white, rich and poor, the perfect confluence of food, religion, and spectacle to distract them from the harsh realities of everyday life. He offered them not just hope that racial unity and personal

perfection could be achieved through the union of religion and the dinner table, but tangible proof.

## **The Importance of Food in America**

Americans have always given special significance to food and drink. When the first colonists arrived they encountered a land of plenty teeming with wildlife. At Plymouth colony in 1621 a storm left the beach covered with piles of lobsters two feet high. "They were so plentiful and so easily gathered that they were considered fit only for the poor," Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont explained in *Eating in America*. The storm left pools of crabs all along the shores of Virginia. Commenting on the abundance of fish at Jamestown, Captain John Smith wrote, "we tooke more in owne hour than we could eate in a day." The colonists wondered at the size of the salmon, strawberries, and lobsters in the New World, and the Pilgrims, finding the luxury of clams and mussels tempered by their abundance, fed them to their hogs.<sup>1</sup>

With origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the act of breaking bread with friends

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<sup>1</sup> Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America: A History* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1976), 51-2.

and neighbors had long been ingrained in religious ritual. Therefore, it was a feast the Pilgrims shared with the Wampanoags after their first arduous winter in New England, which eventually inspired the creation of a national holiday, Thanksgiving, centered around the consumption of large quantities of food. John Smith celebrated his first Christmas in the New World around the dinner table with the Powhatans and noted, "we were never more merry nor fed on more plenty of good oysters, fish, flesh, wild fowle and good bread, nor ever had better fires in England."<sup>2</sup>

A hundred years later, the American colonists placed food and drink high on their list of grievances with the motherland. The Tea Act of 1773 precipitated the infamous Boston Tea Party, in which fifty angry colonists disguised as Native Americans dumped 90,000 pounds of tea into Boston Harbor. Under the stifling economics of mercantilism, tea had become a symbol of British rule. The British used excessive taxes as a weapon against colonial merchant-agitators like John Hancock, who customs officials accused of smuggling Madeira; a type of fortified wine. The number of colonial grievances that arose from the taxation of food and drink led Root and de

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Rochemont to remark, "foodstuffs have to be counted among the causes of the American Revolution."<sup>3</sup> The Continental Army, once war broke out, was equipped, among the normal staples, with sugar, ginger, rum, and molasses, even when they lacked things such as guns and clothing.<sup>4</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that the slaves Americans brought over from Africa and acculturated in the South also held food and drink in special reverence. "In the American South, food has traditionally been a catalyst for social interaction, and southern hospitality is renowned," Pamela Kittler and Kathryn Sucher explained in *Food and Culture in America*. "Food is lovingly prepared for family and friends. The sharing of food is considered an important factor in the cohesiveness of southern black society."<sup>5</sup> An abundance of food was equally important to their antebellum masters. A suitable breakfast in Montgomery, Alabama in the early 1830s, according to one stunned English traveler, contained generous helpings of cornbread, buckwheat cakes, fresh and pickled fish, broiled chicken, beefsteak, hominy, bacon, and eggs.<sup>6</sup>

Religious scholar Jualynne Dodson and sociologist Cheryl Gilkes believed that the act of sitting at the "welcome table" to break of bread with friends, family, and other church members was a relic of African tradition that pointed to

food as, "an important mytho-poetic element in the process of community formation."<sup>7</sup> While it is difficult to dispute that the sharing of food is of central importance in the Afro-Christian tradition, it is equally difficult not to see the similarity to historical traditions in the rest of American society. Food remains a central obsession in American culture, from its religious significance, to its abundance and scarcity, to its effect on health, for both African and European-Americans. Christianity, which preaches that "breaking bread, drinking wine, and praising God



are inextricably tied together,"<sup>8</sup> has long been equally accessible to people of all colors throughout American history. The white followers of Father Divine were certainly no strangers to his doctrines of food and bodily salvation.

### **Father Divine: The Man and His Movement**

Father Divine was baptized in a convergence of Christianity and the culture of consumption. He began life as George Baker, Jr. in the border state of Maryland less than fifteen years after the Civil War. His mother, Nancy, had been born a slave in the 1840s. Two Catholic masters owned her over the course of her life, Lemuel Clemens and Henry B. Waring. Both required that she attend the Catholic churches they had erected on their respective properties. In 1864, when Maryland outlawed slavery, Nancy went into service as a maid and already had two daughters by unknown persons. She married a man named George Baker in the 1870s and the two moved into a ghetto outside of Rockville, Maryland known as 'Monkey Run.' George Baker, Jr. was born shortly after, in May 1879.<sup>9</sup>

Nancy and her family attended Rockville's Jerusalem Methodist Church, a separatist branch, where, according to historian Jill Watts, "inevitably, the intense spirituality and religious dedication of the African-American community left a deep impression on George."<sup>10</sup> His mother died when he was a young man. She

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Goyan Kittler and Kathryn Sucher, *Food and Culture in America: A Nutrition Handbook* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1989), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Root and de Rochemont, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 1-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

was five feet tall and weighed four hundred and eighty pounds. A coffin had to be built inside their house and could only be removed after the doorway had been hastily expanded. Historian R. Marie Griffith put forward the theory that Nancy's extreme size, acquired after moving to Monkey Run, was a response to the oppressive conditions of slavery she had experienced as a young woman. "One wonders whether her large physique was really (or only) a source of embarrassment or whether it could have signified freedom from the chains of poverty and advancement into a new way of life," he speculated. "At the very least, it seems worth asking whether young George, later Father Divine, viewed her weight as something more than a tragic calamity." In George's mind, Griffith believed, Corpulence came to be associated with the overcoming of poverty and its various social stigmas.<sup>11</sup>

But whether he really saw it that way or not, George Baker, Jr. abruptly left Rockville soon after his mother's death and went to Baltimore looking for work. Spurning the poverty and unemployment of the African American sections of the city, he found employment as an independent gardener for a variety of wealthy white residents. He didn't settle there for long. In 1902 George Baker, Jr. set out to preach in the South. By that time he had embraced an amalgamation of Christian doctrines. He picked up bits and pieces from Catholicism, storefront Christianity, and the Methodism of his birth. Coupled with the New Thought doctrine still

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<sup>11</sup> R. Marie Griffith, "Body Salvation: New Thought, Father Divine, and the Feast of Material Pleasures," *Religion and American Culture* 11 (Summer 2001): 134.

making the rounds in Baltimore, he "produced a foundation that potentially had broad appeal to people from diverse religious backgrounds," according to Jill Watts.<sup>12</sup> A New England hypnotist and inventor named Phineas Quimby developed New Thought in the middle of the nineteenth century. Quimby taught that good health could be achieved through positive thinking. "By adopting and adapting components of this doctrine," Jill Watts explained, George Baker, Jr. "created a unique and attractive theology."<sup>13</sup>

In 1906, when he was 27 years old, George Baker, Jr. traveled to California and participated in a spiritual revival known as the Azusa Street Revival, which is also thought to have been the birthplace of Pentecostalism. Fascinated by the religious fervor, he delved deeper into New Thought literature than he had in Baltimore.<sup>14</sup> It was during that revival that George believed the Holy Spirit had entered him and transformed him into a messenger of God's word.

He returned to Baltimore, where he met a man named Samuel Morris who also believed the Holy Spirit had entered him. George and Samuel quickly formed their own church with the help of a local laundress and evangelist named Harriette Snowden. Samuel believed himself to be the incarnation of God and George claimed to be his messenger. The two attracted

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<sup>12</sup> Watts., 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Watts, "'This Was the Way': Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement in Los Angeles during the Great Depression," *The Pacific Historical Review* 60 (November 1991): 477.

a respectable following of over twenty persons, and George Baker, Jr. formally took on the name, "the Messenger."<sup>15</sup>

In 1912 the Messenger decided that *he* was God, not Samuel Morris, and the ensuing internal squabble destroyed their ministry. The Messenger left Baltimore and opted to once again travel south. He brought with him a firm conviction that God's kingdom could be achieved on earth, that racial harmony was possible, and that he should accept no money for his services. Even at this early stage, the banquet was central to his theology. As he traveled around the South, he held sermons in people's homes under the insistence that everyone present should furnish a dish. "At each Holy Communion banquet," Jill Watts explained, "he attempted to recreate Christ's last supper and reinforce his own role as a savior of humankind."<sup>16</sup>

Two years later, in the town of Valsdosta, Georgia, an angry congregation drove the Messenger from their church after he proclaimed that God had returned to earth in the form of a "Negro," but his brazen remarks won over a few who were present. All of his early followers were African American women who found some appealing component to his theology, and some even left home to move in with him. Jill Watts suggested that he appealed to women because he rejected gender distinctions and his insistence on celibacy "freed them from the fear of childbirth."<sup>17</sup> Whatever the reason, his flock continued to grow, which upset many in the local community. As a result, the Messenger was arrested on February 6, 1914

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<sup>15</sup> Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

and charged with lunacy. He was convicted but released from custody with an order to leave town. He took some of his followers with him and continued his circuit around the South, which was eventually expanded to include the Northeast. In 1917 the group settled down in a Brooklyn apartment where they continued their Holy Communion banquets under the strict supervision of the Messenger, who forbid them from sexual activity, smoking, profanity, drugs, and alcohol.<sup>18</sup> There he changed his name for the final time, to Reverend Major Jealous Divine, or simply, Father Divine.

In 1919, a frustrated resident of Sayville, New York, a small all-white vacation community on Long Island, put his house up for sale to a "colored buyer." Father Divine, his new wife, and his flock took the opportunity to escape from the turmoil and religious competition of New York City and purchased the house. "By distancing his disciples from other religious orders, familiar surroundings, and previous companions," Watts argued, "Father Divine eliminated many of the temptations luring away converts and increased his followers' allegiance to and dependence on him."<sup>19</sup> Their respite lasted for a little over a decade, until the Peace Mission movement outgrew its modest surroundings.

Despite the cultivation of a clean and tidy image, Father Divine's increasing popularity worked against him at Sayville. "His expanding congregation included people from all walks of life," Watts explained, "young and old, rich and poor, healthy and infirm, black and white—who worshiped together under his roof."<sup>20</sup> The large

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 61.

influx of people, along with the increasing rowdiness of the Holy Communion banquets, grated against their neighbor's sensibilities. Rumors spread that were fueled by a death (from natural causes) among Divine's following. On May 8, 1931, police arrested Father Divine on charges of being a public nuisance. According to Francis Hoag, editor of the *Suffolk County News*, Divine had brought "undesirable notoriety" to the village "ever since this man with the mysterious financial backing established his home here with the strong lure of free eats."<sup>21</sup> By that time, the average number of Sunday worshippers was over one thousand.<sup>22</sup>

Father Divine was convicted and sentenced to one year in jail and a \$500 fine. The judge died of a heart attack soon after, leading many of Divine's followers to believe that their god had caused the man's death. While Father Divine was in jail, the Peace Mission movement spread across the United States, fueled by the onset of the Great Depression. In 1932, Father Divine moved his followers into Harlem where he met direct opposition from a number of pre-established religious sects. However, one after another seemed to be unable to deal with local problems as effectively as the Peace Mission. One such cult,

<sup>21</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 9 October 1931.

<sup>22</sup> Watts, 75.



*One of Father Divine's Peace Missions.*

*Library of Congress #LC-USF34-012896-D*

led by a man named George Wilson Becton, was known as the "World's Gospel Feast" and provided the same kind of union of food and spirituality as Father Divine. Unfortunately, Becton was kidnapped and murdered by his enemies in 1933, and according to Keith V. Erickson, "the void left by Becton's death was filled by Father Divine."<sup>23</sup>

With a combination of social welfare, spiritual fulfillment, and entrepreneurship, Father Divine gradually replaced many of the holy rollers who promised their followers relief from the Depression but offered no tangible

<sup>23</sup> Keith V. Erickson, "Black Messiah: The Father Divine Peace Mission Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (December 1977): 431.

results. Divine began his economic projects by opening inexpensive restaurants where his followers “volunteered” to work for low wages, and his holdings expanded from there. “By the mid-1930s the Peace Mission was the largest real estate holder in Harlem, owning markets, apartment houses, dry cleaning stores, and a coal business,” historian Mina A. Vaughn described.<sup>24</sup> Father Divine’s communal system allowed his followers to live a higher quality of life with less personal resources. In 1935, Peace Missions dotted the United States and a few opened overseas. Along with this boom came internal dissatisfaction that ended in lawsuits and bad publicity. Father Divine openly displayed luxury as proof of his divinity, while his followers retained little except the bare essentials. The bounty that surrounded him was just an “outer expression of a percent of a percent of a percent, of a sketch of a reflection of the condition of the mind within,” he professed. Backing up this bombastic claim, he served between 2,500 and 3,000 meals daily between 1933 and 1940 for no charge, or for an admission cost of only 15 cents for those who could afford the fee.<sup>25</sup>

The end of the Great Depression, the lawsuits and bad publicity, and old age, along with a rigid restructuring of the organization itself, all contributed to the end of the Peace Mission movement. Father Divine relocated his followers out of Harlem and into Philadelphia, where they resided until his death in 1965. His second wife, a white woman fifty years his junior

<sup>24</sup> Mina A. Vaughn, “Father Divine: (c.1879-1965), Religious Leader,” in *African American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Richard W. Leeman (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Erickson, 434.

known as “Mother Divine” to their followers, took over management of the Peace Missions.<sup>26</sup> A few businesses owned by the movement still operate in the United States today, but millions deserted the fold when Father Divine, who they believed to be God in the flesh, met a very mortal end.

### Conspicuous Consumption and Racial Harmony

Father Divine successfully crossed racial barriers because he appealed to cultural traditions common to all Americans. As Jill Watts eloquently put it, he “provided a theology that promised a better life and a brighter future to anyone, regardless of economic status. Father Divine personified the Horatio Alger myth, and his success proved that even for blacks, America was a land of opportunity.”<sup>27</sup> Food, a symbol of prosperity, was the unifying commodity he used to actualize that myth. The ready availability of food, dolled out by his hands, literally demonstrated that he could give his followers a piece of the American pie. He consciously used the act of sharing food between peoples—a long tradition in American history—to realize his dream of racial harmony. “I have a-plenty to eat, to drink and to wear, and I have plenty of automobiles to ride in; comfort and convenience for you and ME!” was a common boast, and promise, from Father Divine.<sup>28</sup>

In Divine’s mind, race was nonexistent and only served to divide humanity. He refused to be recognized as anything other than God and ordered his followers to break ties with their

<sup>26</sup> Vaughn, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Watts, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson, 437.

previous identities. These commandments were often issued at the Holy Communion banquets, which were central to his theology. In order to realize the old American adage of *e pluribus unum*, “out of many—one,” he enforced a seating pattern that required black and white to sit at alternative intervals. “Father Divine’s own religious vision indicated that his dining rooms were a microcosm of the utopian vision articulated in the Gospels at the great eschatological banquet,” Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Gilkes explained. “The actions in the meals were signs of the actions of a better world to be actualized through his movement.”<sup>29</sup>

The banquets served as a beacon that attracted the poor and destitute to his congregation and demonstrated that he alone held the answer to the country’s ills. His uncanny ability to bring forth prosperity for himself and for his followers set him apart from other self-proclaimed messiahs in the early half of the twentieth century. His secret was simple: rather than simply talking about helping the poor and ending racial animosity, he made steps to do both. “With the exception of Divine’s inconsistent relationship with unions,” historian Robert Weisbrot explained, “he led or cooperated in virtually every major campaign for racial equality during the depression.”<sup>30</sup> To achieve integration, he sent white emissaries into upscale neighborhoods to purchase houses and hotels, to be followed by African Americans who would otherwise have had no access to those areas. In 1935 he organized interracial,

<sup>29</sup> Dodson and Gilkes, 535.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 6.

rural cooperatives in New York, which furnished his restaurants and dinner tables with food. Weisbrot maintained that, "it is indicative of Divine's organizing talent that his rural experiment, perhaps the most productive ever devised primarily for disadvantaged ghetto residents, was merely a sidelight among many other 'utopian' programs that Divine successfully nurtured during this period."<sup>31</sup>

Divine's agricultural experiments, integrated housing, and lavish banquets were all part of an effort to make his followers understand that God would not only provide for them in the afterlife, but also in the here and now. He was the conduit through which prosperity passed. "Divine noted that simply the thought that God was literally handing their food helped believers develop purer, more wholesome bodies and souls," R. Marie Griffith explained.<sup>32</sup> As the food literally replenished their bodies, the power of God replenished their souls. As Father Divine himself made clear, "this material food we are eating is the actual tangibilization of GOD'S Word, of GOD'S Love and of GOD'S Presence; they have been made bread and meat for you to personally eat."<sup>33</sup>

Father Divine promised his followers that they would be entirely reborn and rejuvenated through the act of eating at his table. His food was purported to possess the power to heal the sick, and many who dined with him claimed to have undergone physical and spiritual transformations. Father Divine certainly did not discourage those notions. "This is GOD'S Holy Banquet Table," he asserted. "Wheresoever I AM

functioning and serving the food... I AM serving the Holy Communion for the nourishment of your bodies and for the benefit of your souls; to supply you with Something that will give you victory over sickness and diseases and afflictions, over trials and tribulations."<sup>34</sup>

As the ceremony of the Eucharist is central to mainstream Christianity, and therefore familiar to most Americans, Father Divine's message was well understood and easily transferable into the mundane act of eating. While a priest or reverend merely gave his or her flock a small token of God's flesh and blood in the form of bread and wine, Father Divine offered his followers a bounty of seemingly endless variety. "He dismissed the pie-in-the-sky salvation plans of orthodox Christians and dualistic mind-curists alike," Griffith explained, "offering in their place concrete, pleasurable experience here and now."<sup>35</sup> Such a doctrine was undeniably seductive to many who suffered during the Great Depression. "I did not come to save the SOUL," Divine preached, "but I came to save the BODIES of the children of men."<sup>36</sup> For the many who lacked food and shelter during that time of crisis, their God in human form continually delivered on his promises. In return, they did as he asked and abandoned the vices of the world, which, for many of them, included racial prejudice.

### Conclusions

Father Divine's Peace Mission movement stands as one of the first and only movements led by an African American to achieve racial

integration in any meaningful sense. His success, although also attributable to charisma, organizational abilities, and the economics of the Great Depression, was primarily the result of his skillful use of American traditions, traditions that appealed to a broad range of people regardless of race, class, or gender. He took familiar conceptions of religion, the work ethic, and the centrality of food and compiled them to form an attractive social doctrine familiar enough to the mainstream to attract millions of followers throughout his life, despite his eccentric pronouncements of divinity.

Yet, as so often happens in history, the movement failed to outlive the man. Although scattered outposts remained through the 1960s, the theater of civil rights shifted from the North to the South, and new leaders were thrust into the limelight. However, Father Divine's Holy Communion banquets stand as an interesting historical solution to racial prejudice in America. As the pilgrims shared food with the Wampanoags, and John Smith broke bread with the Powhatans, Father Divine urged black and white to abandon their differences at the dinner table and embrace the bounty of America as one.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Griffith, 136.

<sup>33</sup> *New Day*, 19 October 1939, 106.

<sup>34</sup> Griffith, 138.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>36</sup> *New Day*, 24 August 1939, 86.

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