

Cinnamon, nutmeg, and sugar, now most commonly used in desserts, seasoned the main courses at medieval banquets. They were paired with a selection of peppers, including African malaguetta, Indian long pepper, and galangal—the strong spice now known mainly through Thai cooking, to flavor thin sauces often based on almond milk. Fashionable food was prepared with an eye toward achieving a pleasant color as well as taste. Rich hues could be achieved with such spices as cinnamon and saffron. Contrary to the conceit of movies set in medieval times, meat was not served in large haunches on racks, but was ground up and cooked, often several times, so coloring was useful.

Rarity bred prestige. When pepper became so common in the early 14th century that it was used in meals

served to peasants working in the fields, it began to disappear from recipes for fine cooking. Still, cooks used spices frugally. They were occasionally used to flavor wine, then

reused in sauces.

By the 17th century, European cooks had moved away from heavily spiced sauces to more intense preparations based on butter, herbs, and meat reductions. Traffic in slaves, sugar, and tobacco would eventually outstrip the spice-carrying business. Ambergris, a substance created by digestion in the hindgut of the sperm whale and considered the height of exotic taste in the 14th century, slowly fell out of favor. But spices remained important. New Amsterdam, eventually to become New York, was relinquished by the Dutch to the English in return for

Run, the most remote of the Molucca islands. No wonder the Dutch wanted Run instead of Manhattan: The tiny spice island was the original home of nutmeg.

EXCERPT

On the Dime

In 1946, the Mercury [dime] was replaced. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died the previous year, took his place on the head of the dime that's still in circulation today. The congressional decision to memorialize the creator of the New Deal in this manner was a testament to his search for a cure for polio (resulting in the charity March of Dimes) and carried an implicit reference to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"—the song of the Great Depression that he had helped resolve. The dime, as luck would have it, was also the only denomination not "taken" by another president. For FDR, it was right on the money.

—PHIL PATTON, author of *Dreamland: Travels Inside the Secret World of Roswell and Area 51* (1998), in *AIGA* (Oct. 29, 2008)

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

What's the Buzz?

THE SOURCE: "Religion, 'Westernization,' and Youth in the 'Closed City' of Soviet Ukraine, 1964–84" by Sergei I. Zhuk, in *The Russian Review*, Oct. 2008.

HIP-HOP HAS BEEN HOT IN THE Hezbollah-run suburbs of Beirut, and rock remains popular in Rio, but as scholars sift through the history of the Soviet Union, one of the

unexpected cultural influences to emerge from diaries and police and customs records is the popular force of a Christian rock opera. During the 1970s, young people in the nation's secret rocket-making capital were captivated by *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970).

Dnepropetrovsk, a vast industrial

metropolis in eastern Ukraine, was off limits to outsiders. But its residents were occasionally able to travel to "free" cities such as Lviv in western Ukraine, where they could meet tourists from Poland and Yugoslavia hawking tapes and records of Western music. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, shocking in conservative communities in the United States and banned in South Africa as irreligious, was appealing to Dnepropetrovsk residents, not only for its music but also for its religious content. In the 1970s, the rock opera topped the list of pop-

ular consumption items among Soviet rock fans across the country, writes Sergei I. Zhuk, a historian at Ball State University in Indiana.

The Biblical story behind the opera triggered interest in the history of Christianity, and, while the Bible was officially banned from Soviet libraries, books debunking the stories of the Gospels suddenly became best-sellers and were put on waiting lists. Attendance at Orthodox Church services in Dnepropetrovsk increased, especially at Easter. In 1973, police had to chase crowds of devotees of the opera from the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity.

Oversized metal crosses began dangling from young necks. The KGB reported an upsurge in the smuggling of religious items. More than 60 percent of all residents accused of smuggling silver crosses, Bibles, and icons into Dnepropetrovsk mentioned *Jesus Christ Superstar* as the inspiration for their interest in religion. In the 1970s, a quarter of evangelicals in the region were under 25 years old.

An upsurge in the performance of indigenous music in the West was matched in Dnepropetrovsk by a passion for Ukrainian folk music. This was a welcome development for Soviet officials, but the KGB soon accused local bands of seizing on religious compositions, choosing “Ukrainian nationalistic songs of a Christian character.”

Despite the KGB’s best efforts, Jesus mania survived. The interest in popular religiosity and Western mass culture in Dnepropetrovsk, Zhuk says, highlights the failure of the Soviet system to protect the youth of even an isolated and heavily policed city from “ideological pollution.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Forgive Me Not

THE SOURCE: “Pinning Your Own Tail on Someone Else’s Donkey” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *In Character*, Fall 2008.

ANOTHER POLITICIAN SWEEPED up in a tawdry sex scandal, another celebrity nabbed for driving drunk—then cue the ritual of redemption: the mea culpa media confession, the promise to repent or check into rehab, the teary plea for forgiveness. “Even when we cannot ourselves forgive a transgressor,” Wilfred M. McClay writes, “we usually credit the generosity of those who can.” Indeed, forgiveness is being touted in self-help books for its therapeutic effects: “It makes us, the forgivers, *feel better*.” Forgiveness, McClay contends, is in danger of “being debased into a kind of cheap grace,” a state in which it will have “lost its luster as well as its meaning.”

To McClay, “forgiveness can’t be understood apart from the assumption that we inhabit a moral universe in which moral responsibility matters, moral choices have real consequences, and justice and guilt have a salient role.” It is—or ought to be—a serious business. In ancient Jewish society, transgressors performed sacrificial acts to wipe away their sins, and “in the Christian context, forgiveness of sin was specifically related to Jesus Christ’s substitutionary atonement.” In our time we retain “Judeo-Christian moral reflexes without Judeo-Christian metaphysics,” and discharging the weight of sin becomes more problematic and confusing, especially when the process is complicated by the guilt

many feel about not being able to “diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless.”

Our awareness of our own moral shortcomings, says McClay, a historian at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, makes us all too prone to forgive the failings of others, and also explains today’s odd spate of popular “phony memoirs” such as *Love and Consequences*. “The putative autobiography of a young mixed-race woman raised by a black foster mother in gang-infested Los Angeles,” it was actually written by Margaret Seltzer, a white 33-year-old raised in a prosperous suburb. What Seltzer and other writers of forged memoirs are marketing, McClay writes, is “stolen suffering, and the identification they are pursuing is an identification with certifiable victims.” In a world without a religious route to the absolution of sin, making such an identification “offers itself as a substitute means by which the moral burden of sin can be shifted, and one’s innocence affirmed.”

McClay points to other areas in which moral sensibilities have careened out of control: the public apologies for the institution of slavery, such as one by the U.S. Senate, for instance, or the “faculty and administrator watchdogs” in academia who pounce on even the slightest slips by those who fail to “observe the regnant pieties regarding race, class, or gender in their public statements.” Attacking someone who falls short of perfection, he says, allows the condemners to “displace their guilt onto him, and prove to all the world