

Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating

Norman Wirzba

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Reviewed by: Scott Huelin

Norman Wirzba's most recent book is a most ambitious work, as it sets out to put into conversation two rather disparate discourses. On the one hand, Wirzba has read voluminously in the rapidly expanding world of food studies, an as yet uncodified but nonetheless coherent cluster of subjects comprising agrarianism, locavorism, food security, food safety, and food culture, just to name a few. On the other hand, Wirzba's books also spring from a deep engagement with the breadth of Christian theology—ancient and modern, eastern and western, Protestant and Catholic. Thus he is exceptionally well-positioned to bring these two larger discursive worlds together, to integrate faith and learning, if you will, on the subject of food. While this book will not suit every palate, it is replete with delights for the reader who savors it.

The book has a three-fold structure. The first two chapters set the trajectory for the book by posing a question and then offering an initial gesture toward an answer. Chapter 1, "Thinking Theologically about Food," asks a deceptively simple question: "Why did God create a world in which every living creature must eat?" (1). Any charitable reader who pauses long enough over this question will realize how little thought most of us give to why, much less what and how, we eat. Chapter 2, "The 'Roots' of Eating," then sketches the basis for a theological response to the question of Chapter 1 with reference to the prelapsarian relation of humanity to both God and the world, a relation which is characterized by deep interdependence, mutual respect, and instinctive hospitality. Here Wirzba draws on the history of Trinitarian thought to cast creation as an act of hospitality—a gratuitous gift—flowing from and mirroring the perichoresis of the three Persons. His evocation of Sabbath as the goal of creation allows him to sketch the norm for creaturely interdependence and mutual delight from which we have fallen.

This chapter plants many essential seeds which bear much good fruit later in his argument.

The third chapter, "Eating in Exile," introduces the other partner to this conversation: the vast and growing literature on food studies. In a breathtaking distillation of a diverse body of material, Chapter 3 presents the 'bad news' of our contemporary (and fallen) food culture by weaving a narrative of collective self-destruction through our customary practices of producing, distributing, and consuming food. While many Christians enjoy scoffing at latte-sipping hipsters who stroll through farmers' markets while chatting about the ethical treatment of this evening's main course, an attentive reader will find here a comprehensive and perhaps even compelling case that we should be concerned about the deleterious effects of globalized, industrialized food production. (These two chapters would make excellent reading for even an atheologically-minded reader who wanted a succinct yet thorough introduction to the current literature on the subject.)

The remaining four chapters constitute not only a thoroughly theological response to the food crisis described in Chapter 3 but also a salutary reframing of historic Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy in light of these challenges. Chapter 4, "Life through Death," rethinks not only our own "living sacrifices" (Rom 12:1) but also Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in light of the utter and startling dependence of any creature's life upon the death of other creatures. This notion of sacrifice as self-offering for others also informs Chapter 5, "Eucharistic Table Manners," in which Wirzba demonstrates how the Lord's Supper not only takes seriously the death-in-life character of creaturely existence but also models how to do so without exploiting those on whom our life depends. Chapter 6, "Saying Grace," provides an excellent reflection on how the simple act of thanksgiving before a meal teaches us to receive the fruits of the earth as a gift that cannot be mastered or taken for granted and should not be manipulated. The final chapter centers upon the question in its title ("Eating in Heaven?") and is fittingly eschatological: Here Wirzba brings the threads of all the previous chapters together to argue that both OT and NT prophecy point to

a new creation in which eating remains a mark of our creatureliness and a sign of our communion with God, one another, and the renewed creation.

An ambitious book, indeed, if judged only from the explicit task it sets for itself. However, there is also an implicit task that Wirzba has laid out for himself in this work: How should theological practice, and theological writing in particular, be reshaped in light of the radically dependent and interdependent nature of humanity? If human beings, like all other creatures, are deeply dependent on nature, one another, and God, how should this affect the way we contemplate, teach, and write about the Truth? One answer that Wirzba implicitly offers to this question is simple: Take seriously any and all reflection which takes the created order seriously, whether pagan or Christian, scientific or theological, popular or highbrow, familiar or unfamiliar. As I understand it, Wirzba's own ecclesial background is broadly Reformed, yet his patterns of thought never confine themselves to the tracks worn by that tradition. He draws upon Anglicans such as Rowan Williams and Robert Farrar Capon; Roman Catholics, including Hans Urs von Balthasar and Nicholas Lash; Eastern Orthodox such as Alexander Schmemmann, John Zizioulas, and David Bentley Hart; representatives of Radical Orthodoxy Graham Ward and William Cavanaugh; and Anabaptists such as John Howard Yoder. At the same time, Wirzba draws heavily upon the tradition of Christian thought, enlisting church fathers including Irenaeus, Basil the Great, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, as well as medievals such as John of Damascus, John Scotus Eriugena, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. (Fascinating that a Protestant theologian makes no reference to the Reformers in such a work as this, though he does draw lightly upon Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.) Wirzba's work is also thoroughly informed by his original area of professional expertise, contemporary Continental philosophy, as manifest in his references to Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. And all of this says nothing about the ecological, scientific, social scientific, and journalistic resources marshaled in Chapter 3!

To my mind, the stunning breadth of Wirzba's intellectual and theological resourcefulness is both the strength and the weakness of this book. It is a weakness only because I think the average reader, even a fairly well-read one, will have a hard time finding his footing in such a diverse array of discourses and traditions. Like it or not, most of us have developed habits of thought that prefer to run in well-worn ruts rather than strike out overland, and this book will allow most readers the comfort of a familiar line or pattern of thought only on occasion. But for the more adventurous reader, this book will prove to be a feast. Wirzba's theological method instantiates the very thing it recommends: dependence upon others with whom we share a common concern—namely the relation of human beings to God and to our planet—and a serious effort to find a way back from the brink of universal self-consumption. In doing so, Wirzba has recovered long dormant themes in the Christian theological and practical tradition and put them to good use in aiding the church, and all humanity, to face the unique challenges of the twenty-first century.

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