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Review of Norman Wirzba's *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*

ABSTRACT

The following is a book review of Norman Wirzba's Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating. It acknowledges the content and method of the book as well as some of the project's strengths and weaknesses.

Norman Wirzba, Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xix + 244 pp., \$29.99 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-521-14624-1.

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Christian life is often portrayed as bland and flavorless. Norman Wirzba shatters this hollow understanding, replacing it with an elucidation of faith that is abundantly festive and immensely delightful. He locates the life of faith *within* the larger cycle of life, suggesting that a healthy faith life depends on a realistic, informed, and intentional relationship with food.¹ I left *Food and Faith* deeply satisfied by its development of theological themes in relation to food, stirred by the many questions it seeks to answer and those it provokes, and refreshed by its engaging prose.

Wirzba, professor of theology, ecology, and rural life at Duke Divinity School, offers a series of essays that, though capable of standing alone, when read together bear narrative fruits larger than the sum of their parts. Wirzba's extensive and varied academic and personal (he is, after all, an avid gardener) contributions to the intersections between agrarian life and the life of faith

confirm his expertise. The brief preface frames Wirzba's piece as an extended reflection on a communal meal in which vestiges of trinitarian love are present. Food is necessarily communal and perichoretic insofar as relationality *constitutes* reality, rather than merely characterizing it.² Food becomes the primary way in which we participate in this integral economy of love (Chapter 1).

Wirzba develops an ontological theme that emerges throughout: God as Gardener. God's creative and nutritive nature, which continually sustains all of Creation, suggests that gardening enables us to best understand our creatureliness by revealing our relational dependence on God and creation.³ While gardening, we, like God, "make room" for others to be nurtured and to flourish. The teleological framework of the text is that of the Sabbath rest, the "goal of all existence," which provides a glimpse of the heavenly banquet (Chapter 2).⁴ Our status as "exiles" and the many ways in which we have distanced ourselves from the intentionality of the gardener and the refreshment of the Sabbath are then, quite painfully, illuminated. Sin, ecological devastation, economic disease, and psychological disorder (e.g. obesity, isolation, body shaming) are identified as some of the innumerable "dysfunctions in the world of food" (Chapter 3).

The chapters following explore the theological themes of sacrifice, eucharist, and thanksgiving in relation to food practice. Wirzba reframes sacrifice as a self-offering in which we who offering sacrifice do so with the understanding that what is offered is first given and then passed on, in order that others might live abundantly (Chapter 4). This sacrificial reframing provides the ground for a eucharistic communion reflective of trinitarian love. Here, at the eucharistic table, all things become sign and sacrament of God's love.⁵ As we consume, so too are we consumed by Christ, brought into participation with that which is infinitely larger than ourselves.⁶ When we eat eucharistically we are transformed, with all of creation, in Christ (Chapter 5). Maintaining a sense of gratitude and celebration for such a transformation enables us to continue delighting in our participation in this taste of heaven on earth (Chapter 6).

In his final chapter Wirzba convincingly argues that those in heaven will eat, though the nature of such eating remains uncertain: "Rather than denying

eating altogether, what we need are new ways to imagine eating, fresh ways to conceive what a renewed and reconciled creation productive of food looks like.”⁷ Because eating is so intimately tied with our nature and existence, it is impossible to know what the heavenly banquet might look, smell, feel, taste, and sound like (Chapter 7).

The book is limited in two ways. Firstly, it engages only the Christian tradition. This is an intentional decision acknowledged from the outset. Nonetheless, a broader study of the relationship between food and non-Christian faiths proves a worthy future task. The other more inhibitive limitation is the narrow audience to whom the book is addressed. Wirzba presumes that those reading the book have enough to eat. By addressing those who live with surplus and superabundance (the Global North), Wirzba fails to address the intersections between food and faith for those who hunger. How might experiences of poverty and hunger transform the relationship between food and faith? I am left wanting, eager to broaden the scope of the conversation.

Food and Faith provides a stimulating introduction to the questions surrounding the relationship between discipleship and dining, the cross and cuisine. The book is accessible to a broad audience without sacrificing academic rigor. I heartily recommend this title to anyone who desires to think more deeply, to love more fully, and to eat more decadently. I left this theological feast unsettled by our exilic state, though wholly confident in the all-consuming love of God who is intimately present in all of Creation.

NOTES

- 1 Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 159–60.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 225.