

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

MAY 2009

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 3

## WISDOM FROM THE GARDEN: THINKING ABOUT FOOD AND WHY IT MATTERS

*Tim Schubert*

As typical members of society in the United States, we think very little about the food we eat. We rarely consider the source of our food, who grew it and how it was grown, its nutritional value, the environmental impact of its production, how it got from its source to our tables, who handled and perhaps processed it before we put it in our mouths. For better *and* for worse, our relative affluence has made it possible for most of us to be concerned with other matters. Granted, we are very concerned about the flavor and other sensual aspects of food consumption, and we notice the price; but beyond that, we are ambivalent or even thoughtless about the subject.

As preparation for the recent Monday Class discussions at the Study Center on "The Meaning of Food," with the aid of a concordance I resolved to consult every verse of Scripture that made any reference whatever to food or agriculture. This was no small task. I was reminded and surprised to realize how much the Bible has to say about our nourishment and how we go about feeding ourselves. My thoughts immediately went to the idea captured in passages in Deuteronomy 8 cautioning the Israelites that in their prosperity they would be tempted to forget the source of their blessing and take the bounty for granted. I am convinced that we are guilty of precisely the same forgetfulness as the Israelites. As a society, we need to reawaken our sense of gratitude for all the good gifts God bestows, especially our daily bread.

This essay is comprised of four parts. After a quick review of selected fundamental teachings

from the Old and New Testaments on food and agriculture, I will describe an incipient agricultural emergency in the West that admittedly takes some deliberate attention to recognize. The emergency is not yet in the form of outright food shortages and accompanying malnutrition / starvation such as we witness year after year in poorer countries around the globe; instead it centers on the themes of sustainability and externalities of modern industrial agricultural practices coupled with our deeply ingrained food habits. Third, I will suggest some ways in which we actively worsen the effects of the

"curse on the ground" (Gen. 3). Finally, I will conclude with some ideas on how we might make course corrections to be better stewards - more harmonious and responsible members of Creation - in our own small spheres.

### *Food and Agriculture in Scripture*

The Old Testament readily acknowledges our fundamental need for physical (as well as spiritual) nourishment, and it gives credit for earth's food bounty to our Creator as part of common grace (Gen. 2:8-9, 16-17; Deut. 8:3 & Mt. 4:4). Gratitude and worship should be the natural outgrowth of recognizing this state of affairs, though instead we prefer to take full credit as self-sufficient, autonomous persons reaping the rewards for hard work. We should remember that "working the ground" was proscribed before the Fall (Gen. 2:15), but after the Fall it became more burdensome and less productive because of the curse (Gen. 3:17-19). Even a purely naturalistic assessment of agriculture reveals that the human contribution and participa-

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tion in the process falls far short of placing us in control in the strict sense.

Agriculture at the most basic level is husbandry of the photosynthetic process upon which all life on earth depends. This bold statement about the worth of green plants is not the slightest bit exaggerated. Despite the curse, photosynthesis retains significant elements of the miraculous and transcendent, well beyond our full intellectual and physical grasp. Though the passage in Genesis (1:26-31) assigning mankind the role of stewardship over the created order ("con-service" in Calvin Dewitt's terminology, or as "viceroy" in Pope Benedict's) is variously understood to some degree, the job is ours whether we embrace it or not. Obviously, some do well in the role, while others do not. Failure can be in the form of obvious, deliberate greed and exploitation, but failure also arises out of simple ignorance and unreflectiveness. Our affluence and detachment from the natural order puts many of us firmly in the second category of offenders.

Two major themes in the New Testament with agricultural overtones bear mentioning. The first touches on the positive value of curses and blessings in defining safe boundaries or limits within which to conduct our lives and find fulfillment in the created order (Heb. 12:1-2). Viewed rightly, a curse is a form of loving discipline given to remake us and to direct us away from futility and harm. The usefulness of the curse lies in our attitude toward it. The second theme comes from a stirring passage in Revelation (22:2-3) which indicates that an actual Tree of Life *orchard* will line the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God in the New Order, bearing twelve crops of fruit, one crop every month. It is also worth remembering that eventually the curse will be lifted. Until then, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that humanity's role as stewards of Creation is annulled. Some of God's redeemed no doubt are longing to faithfully serve in this stewardship role forever. But for now, we should accept the idea that agriculture, even when done with the greatest care, will always involve struggle and hardship, and we would be wise to allow that resistance to accomplish something mysteriously good in us.

*The Food Crisis: Global and Local*

The global food crisis felt mostly in the Third

World is perennial and obvious to all who take time to notice. Cause and effect is not much debated – these areas remain poor because they cannot grow their own food, not the other way around. The ability of a people group to feed themselves is the foundation for a successful civilization. So, the problem with food is not simple scarcity. In fact, world food production supplies more than enough calories to sustain the global population with about 15% to spare. Hunger persists largely because of political and economic barriers to food distribution. Repeated attempts to move modern agricultural technologies into poor rural environments to make them self-reliant have met with failure because the inputs are not sustainable. Soils in poor areas are so depleted that they cannot make use of the supplemental fertilizers, and water availability is not dependable. Because we fail to deliver food where people are located, a death sentence falls on about 98,000 people every day. Beyond that benchmark of failure, malnourishment of approximately 1/7 of the world population (almost 1 billion people) robs them of a potentially more meaningful existence because they lack energy, physical strength, and intellectual capabilities.

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Simultaneous with the Third World state of affairs, we in the West tend to consume more than is good for us, ironically just about the same amount as the hungry elsewhere are missing.

For those of us in the West who consider ourselves Christian, this places us in a place of necessary reflection as we ponder the admonitions of Scripture to feed the hungry (Is. 58:7; Ez. 18:6,16; Mt. 25:35, 42).

A glance at the last 10,000 years of human history should give one a sense of uneasiness concerning our food security. In the last 1000 years world population has rocketed from around 250 million in 1000 to around 6.8 billion in 2000. So in the most recent 1/10 of human history we have experienced virtually all of the growth of human population. Though our present problem is mostly food distribution, the rapid population increase points to potentially catastrophic food shortages; modern agriculture will be hard-pressed to meet the needs even without predicted environmental upsets. Civilizations such as the Mayan of the Yucatan of Mexico and the southwestern American Indian cultures closer to home met their ends as a result of failing agriculture. These and similar grim tales por-

tend a comparable fate for Western civilization if we cannot find some way to build a consistent margin into the food supply.

#### *Uniqueness in Agricultural Economy*

From a modern economic standpoint, agriculture has an enormous influence on civilization, especially on our economic practices. This leads to incongruous linkages to our broader economy. As is the case for other commodities, gaps in supply and demand are used to advantage by investors to create winners and losers in the marketplace. Agricultural products were the first form of wealth, spawning economic organization and specialization of functions among laborers. Capitalism and the Industrial Age arose out of agricultural economics, and agriculture in one form or another still provides the foundation for any workable national or global economy and a flourishing society.

As agriculture scales up to meet greater demands, the “food factory” mentality with its emphasis on inputs and outputs now predominates. Extreme consolidation operates from production to processing to distribution to sales, with each new level driven by economy of scale and an assumed motive to cater to consumer demand and convenience. It is easy to understand why we are no longer cognizant of food matters. If you’ve got money, food just happens. We don’t even have to prepare it if we don’t want to, or sadly, if we don’t know how. How strange and out of control this process must seem to the persons who faithfully grow our food for us.

The wholesale attempt to press the agricultural economy into the mold of the broader economy has had one glaring and initially unforeseen consequence. By producing food where it can be done cheapest, shipping it to where the demand is highest, and using futures to stabilize supply and price, profits are maximized and the scale of agriculture has swollen to the point that the smaller family farm is no longer a viable option. Many versatile, highly skilled farmers and their privately-owned land parcels get absorbed into this vortex of consolidation and eliminated. Without deliberate protections, this is how pure capitalism works.

The agricultural economy, however, has additional unique features that separate it from the larger economy, features we ignore at our peril. Conventional economic principles, especially the

application of the comparative advantage model, simply do not apply well to agriculture. Below are some other reasons why the agricultural economy should not be pressed into the broader economy:

1) Continued scaling up is not always possible or advisable. Crops and animals cannot prosper in a monoculture. Huge expanses of a single plant species or concentrated animal feeding operations are unhealthy from both an environmental and community plant / animal health perspective. In animal agriculture, the considerations of large-scale feedlots and slaughterhouses exceed the ethical boundaries of most members of the community. Crop security from start to finish is less manageable on this grand scale. The need for cheap and abundant labor on demand at harvest time puts a temporary but enormous strain on the work force for crops not amenable to machine harvesting. Distribution from areas of concentrated production to consumers in various locations uses non-renewable fuels.

2) Additional externalities (costs not directly accounted for) accrue as a result of attempts to scale up. Examples include the costs to manufacture and use modern synthetic fertilizers and pesticides which require even more non-renewable energy and have enormous potential for pollution and environmental upset.

The artificial augmentation of the earth’s natural nitrogen cycle with biologically active nitrogen obtained by the energy-intensive Haber-Bosch process has been both a blessing and a curse since its large-scale adoption in developed countries beginning in the 1950’s. Inefficient water use and soil erosion squander two of the fundamental natural resources for a viable civilization.

3) Perishability and susceptibility to contamination of the scaled-up crop limits the options available to the producer, putting them at the mercy of distributors, processors and ultimate purchasers.

4) The raw food product is amenable to considerable processing for consumer convenience, however, as it turns out, the main benefit is added profit to the processor. As consumers, we end up spending unnecessarily to consume more than is good for us – 47% of us are now overweight or even obese – resulting in significant and costly obesity-related health problems estimated at \$56 billion every year. All this uses far more calories to produce than the

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product provides in return in the form of food value. Our food habits unnecessarily and unsustainably “mine” the earth of its resources.

5) These developments naively transfer the trust and control over what, how, and even where we eat to persons guided almost exclusively by a profit motive. We are losing the pleasure and skill of cooking for one another and eating fewer meals together in community. Carried to its logical conclusion, a comparative advantage agricultural economy would put the US into a position of importing much of its food, and struggling to inspect that commodity for wholesomeness and safety. The US already imports about 15% of its total food supply, and has the capacity to inspect with mixed success only about 2% of what is imported.

#### *Moving Beyond the Curse*

Considering all this, one wonders how we allowed ourselves to get into this precarious muddle. We have proven once again that success, prosperity and affluence have a way of taking our attention away from the source of our blessings and making us complacent, selfish and inconsiderate. As we come to our senses, I suggest we consider the following possible remedies. These are just a few of my favorites; there are many more. No single solution or dramatic corrective is possible. We got into the predicament incrementally, and getting out of it will no doubt follow the same process.

**Return to the smaller diversified farming operation to replace some of the widespread industrial farming.** A successful diversified farm will probably raise much perennial forage for animals. It is best that meat is produced and eaten in moderation, while most of the diet consists of plant products. Meat provides a nutritiously dense food source from domestic animals able to concentrate protein from forages on land not productive enough to grow grains, vegetables or fruits that we eat directly. Forage and “wastes” (a poor term for the material unfit for human consumption resulting from agriculture) feed livestock or improve soil tilth and fertility over time to a condition that supports some grains, possibly vegetables and fruits for local sales. Some reliance on large scale farms using artificial fertilizers and pesticides is vital to feed the global population, but diversified farms devoted to recycling all animal

and plant wastes, building soil fertility naturally, reducing soil erosion and using water more conservatively have a significant and expanding contribution to make and are much more sustainable. These new smaller farms must be profitable, so we consumers should be willing to spend more on our unprocessed local food to cover the externalities of this or any other kind of agriculture. Only those who can afford to take risks can do so. Sustainability applies to all aspects of the agricultural enterprise, environmental and economic.

**Promote urban agriculture, especially of fruits and vegetables.** Grow it yourself, trade and barter, or buy it locally. This idea has many benefits. Regrettably, most of our human settlements have occupied the best and most fertile agricultural land in their locale. Unrealistic supermarket quality standards for produce result in enormous waste of perfectly wholesome foods. Reinvigorating agriculture in the open urban spaces and landscapes will reduce food transportation costs, promote community spirit, beautify living spaces, align with the trend toward smaller and more diverse cropping systems for the pest management advantages, reduce waste of food and production resources as we accept imperfect but wholesome produce, and reconnect much of the population with the natural world – the source of their nourishment.

**Discourage the cultivation of food grains for biofuels.** The recent frenzy to grow more corn for ethanol to supplement American vehicle fuel supplies had the unfortunate consequence of driving up both food corn prices and the prices of other staple food grains that were now being grown in lesser amounts. The effect was a temporary windfall for grain farmers, but an economic disaster for those living on a dollar or two a day. Western culture squanders much non-renewable energy anyway, so a combination of greater reliance on muscle energy, conservation, and alternative energy from non-food sources (algae and cellulosic crop/wood wastes for example) are much better ideas.

**Reduce the amount of trash you furnish to the “waste” stream.** Compost kitchen scraps and yard material (leaves, grass clippings, tree limbs) to fortify local soils. Recycle as much paper, plastic, metal and styrofoam as the system where you live will per-

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## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

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### SPRING 2009 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

**The following are highlights of this past spring at the Christian Study Center**

#### **Director's Class - "Reading the Gospels, part 2"**

Instructor: **Richard Horner**, Executive Director

**Monday Class - "The Meaning of Food: Wisdom from the Garden"**  
Instructors: **Tim Schubert** (Florida Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services),  
**Samuel Snyder** (Religion, Univ. of Florida), **Richard Horner** (CSC)

#### **Reading Group - "Essays and Poetry in 'Truth-telling'"**

Faciliator: **Todd Best**, Director of Programs

#### **Graduate Roundtable - "Readings in Dialectics and Discourse"**

Faciliator: **Todd Best**, Director of Programs

#### **Forum on Religion and Scholarship**

#### **"Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion in History"**

**Peter Brown (Princeton University)**

"Between Syria and Egypt: Alms, Works, and the Origins of Christian Monasticism"

**Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth College)**

"Scholars and Converts: European Jews Embrace Islam"

**Lamin Sanneh (Yale University)**

"The Return of Religion in Africa"

*Note: The Christian Study Center co-sponsored this lecture series with  
UF's Dept. of History and the Center for Jewish Studies.*

## *Saying Good-bye to Todd Best, Director of Programs*

We are sad to announce that, due to financial constraints, we will be saying good-bye to Todd Best at the conclusion of the 2009 spring semester. Todd Best, who is our Director of Programs and editor of *Reconsiderations*, has been an important part of the Study Center's history from its beginning and has, in fact, served with the center three separate times. First, he contributed to the discussion that led to the start-up of the center and worked as a part-time intern while completing his MA in Religion at the University of Florida. Soon after that he worked with us part-time, and most recently, he has served on staff full-time for the past three years. During this time Todd has contributed significantly in numerous ways. He has upgraded and developed several key areas of our operations including *Reconsiderations*, our web site, *e-considerations*, our in-house technology including our wireless services, our much-improved publicity, and Pascal's coffeehouse. Todd has also played a central role in creating and overseeing our educational program. He was especially central to last year's class on "Technology and Local Ecological Health," which utilized local faculty and brought Cal DeWitt to the UF campus, and he played a leading role again in this spring's class on "The Meaning of Food: Wisdom from the Garden." Todd has also led all three of our regular reading groups and will be especially missed by the members of the Graduate Roundtable.

We will miss Todd tremendously, and our prayer is that the skills that he has shown and developed while with us here at the Christian Study Center will bear good fruit in another setting where Todd can pursue his vision for bringing Christian thought and academic discourse together. Please do pray for Todd, his wife Holli, and their daughter Marin as they seek God's leading. Pray also for us here at the Study Center as we adjust to this loss and seek to build on the solid foundations that have been laid in recent years.

## CONSIDERING THE WORK OF RODNEY STARK

C. John Sommerville

Rodney Stark has always been a maverick, and reviews might make you wary. Many of his colleagues write poorly; he writes well. Many of them pretty much ignore religion's own claims; he loves to give reasons in support of religion's own claims. Many of them don't see much difference between religions; he does. Many think religion is a thing of the past; he thinks it has a big future. Still, he shares enough of the standard academic assumptions that it is hard to dismiss him. He even used to claim to be an atheist. The unfavorable reviews often boil down to unhappiness that he's being unconventional. I can't recommend all of his books, and I'll mention those. But he's not simply popularizing what is known; he's helping to turn scholarship around, and in a direction that you might applaud.

There is a bit of a problem at the start with Stark's main theory about religion. It is a form of "rational-choice theory," which sounds secular. Essentially it means we can give religious persons credit for being reasonable. Religion is not simply irrational, as some of his colleagues argue. Of course, religious choices do not make sense to everyone. Believers' cost/benefit analysis is based on "goods" that not everyone thinks even exist. Still, sociology studies actions, not some objective truth behind them, and he thinks the actions of religious people often make good sense. This theory doesn't allow Stark to make transcendent truth-claims for religion, and this is what keeps him within the objective rules of academic scholarship. But neither does he accept the unwarranted claim that there is no religious reality!

In short, Stark's theory doesn't argue that religion is "real" or "true," in any transcendent sense. But the theory assumes that religion is as real as anything else we study. Doubtless some people's religious behavior and thinking can be explained in psychological or sociological terms, but not the concept itself. So the bottom line is that Stark's theory at least calls the alternative theories into question. In effect, his rational-choice approach allows his studies to sound like common sense, so it shouldn't matter much to the general reader.

After graduate work at Berkeley, Stark started his career at the University of Washington and wrote about American religion. In two books in the mid-1980's, he and William Sims Bainbridge announced their rational-choice theory. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (University of California Press, 1985) was one of the first studies to

cast doubt on "secularization theory," the idea that religion was bound to disappear as society becomes more disconnected from religion. The subtitle refers to their idea that secularization and religious revival actually feed off each other! Then *A Theory of Religion* (Lang, 1987) spelled out their rational-choice approach, making them controversial within their discipline.

This part of Stark's career was summed up in his important and respected work on *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy*, with Roger Finke (Rutgers University, 1992). It was an explanation of the differences in the success of various denominations. Collections of Stark's essays, in *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion and Exploring the Religious Life* are for specialists and not of general interest.

About then Stark set off on his own, and began painting on a much larger canvas. He was especially drawn to the history of the early Christian movement. To my mind, *The Rise of Christianity*, which originally had the subtitle *How the Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, 1996), is his most intriguing book. As a sociologist, Stark didn't just take Christianity as an historical "given," but realized that its miraculous success had to be explained. Sociologists are supposed to be experts on things like "movements." So Stark tried to explain how martyrdom was crucial to the early Church's success, by that cost/benefit analysis. He has to explain how fairly slow growth could so quickly accomplish the defeat of the Roman Empire. For it is a mistake to assume that this revolution, perhaps the greatest in history, was due to a political move by the emperors. One has to ask why they turned to the Christian God, when they had their choice of all the religions of the Hellenistic world - more than we have today. In a sequel, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (Harper, 2006), Stark fleshed out this story by showing how crucial urban growth was in the spread of Christianity. This takes one down to a local level, where it is fascinating to see him marshal his evidence. Specialists criticize some of Stark's confident use of this evidence, but he has raised questions that they now have to deal with. And these books could also be edifying to believers.

Other books are more speculative and sometimes even more questionable. *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (Random House, 2005) has been controversial, not because Stark's interpretation is faulty but because it challenges the Enlightenment notions of "Reason" that we were all raised on. Plenty of historians of philosophy see things largely his way. Those who express

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shock have never learned how theology has helped refine logic and other aspects of philosophy, and even science. Most recently, we have *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (Harper, 2007). This is rather speculative, but no more so than the classic sociologies of religion that Stark is assessing. And again, he challenges all naturalistic theories, and steps on some multiculturalist toes.

You see from Stark's publishers that he has a secure place in our high-brow culture. He has many academic critics, who find his very confident manner and his obvious religious sympathies to be grating. Stark has recently moved to Baylor University, which required stated agreement with the principles of that Baptist institution. Although the move caused surprise, we cannot expect it to curb his independence, which has always been marked. What is more important, he will doubtless continue to be clear in his views, and more frank about his reasons than many of his colleagues. Stark is a gift we should be grateful for and pass on to others.

*A board member of the Christian Study Center, C. John Sommerville is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Florida. He has just published a new book titled Religion in the National Agenda: What We Mean by Religious, Spiritual, Secular (Baylor, 2009).*

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mit. Reuse and repair what you have so that you leave a light mark on the environment. Pass usable items on to others rather than throw them away.

**Reflect upon the food and agriculture lessons of Scripture.** So many thought-provoking and edifying themes are there - fasting; pruning; gleaning; sowing seed on good ground; a seed's death leads to fruit-bearing; one's labor relates to one's eating; we reap what we sow; wheat and tares; mustard seed faith; the garden settings for the most important events in history; the Lord's Supper. Our relationship with God, people, and Creation is so clearly portrayed in these allusions and metaphors.

When we recognize that we do in fact face a food crisis on numerous levels, even in the West, we will need to think more deeply about our circumstances. This reflection, undergirded by moral resources like Christian Scripture and the tradition that flows from it, can help us in renewing our perspective and re-directing our course. Of course looking outside ourselves to a source of wisdom and guidance like the Scriptures reminds us that our physical nourishment, as important as it is, is surpassed by a need for spiritual nourishment that has everlasting consequences. But, as is true in so many other experiences as part of Creation, the physical is where the spiritual gets expressed and gets worked out. We could do no better than to pursue ways to keep the physical and spiritual together and not separated as we are so prone to do.

*Tim Schubert is a plant pathologist for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. His PhD is from the University of Missouri in plant pathology.*

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

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## INSIDE THIS EDITION

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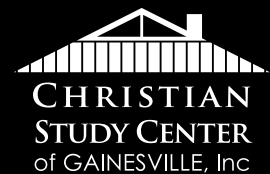
## SUMMER CALENDAR

### Program Note

*As is our habit, we will not offer educational programming during the summer. Our program of classes, reading groups, and other events will resume with the start of the fall semester in late August. However, our building will be open throughout the summer whenever the University of Florida is in session with summer school. We will not have our coffee bar open, but we will have self-service coffee and water available for those who use the building. We are always happy to see students and faculty make use of our space as they pursue their work in the university.*

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