

# RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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## EATING AS A "SPIRITUAL EXERCISE"

*Norman Wirzba*

*Dr. Norman Wirzba began our Justice and the Environment series this semester with his lecture, "Theological Reflection on Justice and the Land." The following is an excerpt from his book Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating. Dr. Wirzba is the Professor of Theology and Ecology at Duke Divinity School. We encourage the purchase of this book for your own library.*

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One of the lasting contributions of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* is to have shown how a considerable amount of contemporary eating is without mercy or art. Besides the fact that a lot of fast food is bad for personal health, bad for the workers who provide it, bad for the animals raised and slaughtered in its name, and bad for the ecosystems that grow it, the very idea of fast, cheap, convenient food suggests eating is not supposed to be the activity whereby people honor God, appreciate creation, or accept responsibility for their membership within it. Is eating simply a mechanical act to be judged primarily in terms of efficiency and price? To "grab a bite on the go" communicates that people do not believe their eating should occasion the sustained attention or reflection that might lead to greater care of our food networks and more regular celebration of the gifts of life.

Fast eating is but a symptom of the more generalized speed that drives and determines contemporary culture. The frantic pace that often characterizes work and social life makes it much less likely that people will learn the disciplines of attention, conversation, and gratitude that are crucial in a celebratory and responsible life. Failing the art of reflection,

people will often find themselves committed to priorities and engaged in practices that would, if carefully examined, register as unacceptable or wrong. Or they will altogether fail to see and taste where they are, and thus forfeit the opportunity to be alive to the mystery and grace of life.

The temptation to an unreflective life is hardly new. Already in the ancient world Socrates called people to step outside of the conventions and trajectories of popular culture because these lead to the neglect and diminishment of our souls. An unreflective life, in Socrates' view, leads to the accumulation

of wants, desires, fears, and illusions that finally end in jealousy, desperation, and war. Socrates called people to a life of philosophy so that they might learn to resist those temptations that lead to a degraded life. He did not ask them to sign on to a body of philosophical teachings or formulas. What he most wanted was for his fellow Athenians to care about what was truly important. He wanted people to

be personally transformed by the insights deep reflection and probing conversation made possible.

Pierre Hadot has described the Socratic style of philosophizing as a "spiritual exercise." Exercises of this sort are not about indoctrination but about developing in people a *way* of life or an *art* for living. The effect of spiritual exercises is to create

a concrete attitude and determinative life-style, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but

“ Is eating simply a mechanical act to be judged primarily in terms of efficiency and price? ”

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on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and make us better.... It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by the unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of a spiritual exercise is to develop in people the habits that will enable them to live a more ordered, measured, reflective, free, attentive, available, and responsible life.

According to the Hellenistic schools of philosophy that developed this technique, too many people live in ways that exhibit fear, worry, alienation, blindness, or hubris. What people needed, therefore, were practical habits that would confront them with how they are currently thinking and living, and strategies to bring their minds and desires into closer alignment with the truth of the world.

It is helpful to characterize eating as a spiritual exercise. The purpose of people who gather around a table to eat is not simply to shovel nutrients into their bodies. Eating together should be an occasion in which people learn to become more attentive and present to the world and each other. Because eating is something we regularly do, it can be the training ground where people learn to articulate their fears and worries, but also name the many sources of nurture and help that are evident at the table. With the help of each other we can practice the skills of conversation, reflection, and gratitude that contribute to a more completely human life. Eating with each other we discover the world and learn to evaluate and respond to it. We begin to see that we are part of a community of life that requires us to be responsible within it. To accomplish these goals, however, will require people to move within a "Slow Food" orbit, and adopt patterns of daily life that are not so frantic and blind.<sup>2</sup>

When eating becomes a spiritual exercise, it isn't simply that people will have occasions to become more attentive to each other and the world. They will also have the opportunity to

see, receive, and taste the world with spiritual depth. What I mean is that the careful attention that promotes thoughtful eating, particularly eating that is informed by the Eucharistic table, will also potentially lead eaters into an understanding of food as ultimately rooted in the grace of God. To move into this possibility, however, requires that we look at eating in an unhurried yet fresh way, a way that is open to dimensions of depth that elude us if we are not attentive.

What would it mean to eat with deep appreciation and with a sense for food's theological significance? What we need is a sense for life's fragility and gratuity, a taste for the world's giftedness and grace contained in every bite. Rarely considered in our eating is the truth that food, which is the necessary means for the continuation of our life, is not itself the source of life. To thoughtfully bite into an apple is to realize that even as it nourishes us, the apple has its

own nurture beyond itself. Though eating can be among our most pleasurable acts, it is also inherently troubling because we know that we will have to eat again. Eating makes our life possible, but food is not itself the "liveliness" of life. Eating invites us to commune with others, but it also invites us to discover and commune with the source and sustainer of all life.

In describing eating as a spiritual exercise, let me underscore that I am not advocating the "spiritualization" of food. Food does not become more ethereal and less material as a result of thoughtful eating. Rather, what a theological approach to eating does is enable the perception of food within a context that stretches *through* the many ecological and social relationships of this world to the divine creator and sustainer of it. To approach food with a concern for its theological depth is to acknowledge that food is precious because it has its source in God. To catch a glimpse of what might be involved in this theological approach, consider the arresting speech of Father Zossima as given by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth, and made his garden grow, and

“Eating together should be an occasion in which people learn to become more attentive and present to the world and each other.”

everything that could come up came up, but what grows lives and is alive only through the feeling of its contact with other mysterious worlds; if that feeling grows weak or is destroyed in you, then what has grown up in you will also die. Then you will become indifferent to life and even grow to hate it. That is what I think.<sup>3</sup>

This way of speaking will strike many as peculiar and odd, even fanciful and ridiculous. What could “other mysterious worlds” possibly mean, and why is it important that people acknowledge that the “seeds” in the garden of life make contact with a world beyond this one?

Dostoevsky wanted us to understand that it is possible to live in a world and be spiritually dead to it. This is because we can grow to view the world (and our food) as consisting of material entities or varied chemical nutrients that are themselves dead, and thus essentially bereft of all goodness and beauty. The world, in this view, simply is the collection of random and accidental things. This is a world without paradise and spiritual significance. In it, the people live under “the tyranny of material things and habits” (370). They do not deeply love, and so are incapable of perceiving “the divine mystery in things” (375). The world is what its surface appearance suggests. There is no transcendence within or beyond it to captivate us. The implication is that we can then freely transform whatever we meet – fields, chickens, agricultural workers, food servers, even whole countries – into a thing or tool that serves a utilitarian or profitable end.

Rowan Williams, along with many others, has described this malaise as the departure of the sacred from the world: “The world without the sacred is not just disenchanting but deprived of some kind of depth – that is, of the sense that what we encounter is already part of a complex of interrelation before it is part of our world of perception.” This is a flat and boring world in which things have significance primarily in terms of their ability to satisfy an ego’s desires. Things *are* what we *take them to be*. They have no integrity of their own, no sacred core or center. Rather than being icons that open to a greater world of significance and meaning, creatures are reduced to idols that reflect the aspirations, hopes, fears, and designs of people (or, as we said earlier, food is reduced to items that serve an industrial process and satisfy a business plan). In this depthless world it

is very difficult to have abiding and significant relationships with others. “We are en route to regarding and treating it [i.e., the world] as related only to the individual will, and thus as, ultimately, only instrumental to that will’s purposes.”<sup>4</sup> That we relate to others, and how, is a feature of choices that have little grounding and can change from moment to moment.

Dostoevsky feared a world that has been reduced to a utilitarian or economic calculus because in such a world there are no *creatures* but only *things*, things with no abiding significance. This is Steven Weinberg’s pointless world in which it makes little sense to cherish food or anything else. Things are not delectable or worthy of our delight. To put it in terms more resonant with our own time, we are material bodies struggling to survive and adapt in a cold, mostly inhospitable, and unforgiving universe. Whether we survive is a feature of luck or superior cunning. Whatever our fate, however, it is best not to take our struggles or the world with too much seriousness. This is because we live in a world “in which nothing is serious – in which nothing, that is to say, *signifies*, opens unexpected horizons, exhibits depth or suggests a narrative larger than that of [ourselves] as rootless individuals.”<sup>5</sup> If nothing is sacred, worship, but also gratitude and responsibility, lose all seriousness and significance. In a world without theological or moral depth, it is impossible to understand violence against others or the world as violent, perhaps even blasphemous. This is because there is nothing of significance that can be violated. Equally important, there is nothing of significance that can be worthy of human affection and fidelity. The world – its eaters and its food-producing fields – has ceased to be a gift or a blessing because it has been reduced to brute, mute fact.

Father Zossima’s claim that this world is alive through its mysterious connection with other worlds is Dostoevsky’s way of pointing to creation’s depth. It is his realization that things are never simply “things” exhausted by their surface or material makeup. Their truth and meaning lies beyond or more deeply within them, and register in us as the realization of their integrity, value, and spiritual significance. Food is not reducible to material stuff because it is the carrier of and witness to life’s liveliness. Bruce Foltz describes this as the world presenting a “face” to us: “nature presents a face here, expresses an inner life, only because it is at the same time disclosed as being turned radically and ecstatically toward a distance unto which all the resonance of the life is directed, and from which

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all life is itself derived.”<sup>6</sup> What we see is never simply the seen itself but also that mysterious and unseen (sacred) “reality” that brings what is into being. Our gaze at a creature, in other words, does not stop at the creature’s surface but extends beyond it to its dependence upon and source in a Creator. The Logos through which all things in the world came to be is also the life and light within each thing (John 1:1-5).

To transform eating into a spiritual exercise is to cultivate the practical conditions and habits – attention, conversation, reflection, gratitude, honest accounting – in which food and the world can be perceived to have a face. When we

meet and receive the face of creation, personal freedom can be called into question because now we are responsible for what we do, and must give an account as to whether or not we honored the sanctity before us. A collection of valueless, random entities cannot be violated. A gift or blessing can. But for us to see with depth and appreciate the gifted and graced character of the world we must ourselves be spiritual beings, beings that carry the “seeds” or spiritual sensitivity for a world of meaning beyond the realm of brute, material facts. We must be capable of communion, capable of entering into and seeing the value of a community that is not simply a collectivity. When we fail to recognize spiritual

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## POEM FOR ADVENT

“THOU WHO WAST RICH BEYOND ALL SPLENDOUR”

*by Frank Houghton*

*Typically, in this issue of Reconsiderations we include an advent poem, and usually we draw this poem from the more distant past. These poems are often rather demanding but always rich in meaning. This time we are offering a more recent, accessible poem, written about half a century ago by Frank Houghton. This short work draws our attention where it should be -- to the remarkable appearance of God on earth as a baby -- and it offers rich imagery for reflection. We trust it will help draw your own thoughts to the incarnation of our Lord and help lead you into another worshipful celebration of the one who, though rich, became poor that we might become rich in him.*

*If you do not know this poem as a Christmas carol, do look it up for the music. It has been set to a lovely French carol called QUELLE EST CETTE ODEUR AGREABLE 9.8.9.8.9.8. It has clearly become a favorite of our director here at the study center, and we hope it becomes a favorite of yours as well.*

*May you have a blessed Christmas.*

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becamest poor;  
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,  
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.  
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becamest poor.

Thou who art God beyond all praising,  
All for love's sake becamest man;  
Stooping so low, but sinners raising  
Heavenwards by thine eternal plan.  
Thou who art God beyond all praising,  
All for love's sake becamest man.

Thou who art love beyond all telling,  
Saviour and King, we worship thee.  
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,  
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.  
Thou who art love beyond all telling,  
Saviour and King, we worship thee.

*Eating as Spiritual Exercise, continued from page 4*

depth in the world, when we fail to be spiritual beings ourselves, it is inevitable that we will grow indifferent to life, perhaps even grow to hate it as a pointless and cruel accident.

Another way to put this is to say that a spiritually trained person has cultivated habits of prayer in which a world of others is understood and received in terms of its life in God. The patterns of life are not hurried through. Rather, one's life follows the discipline of spiritual exercise that slows and focuses one's attention to what is there and important. Practicing attention, people can now receive their world as a place of belonging. They can experience life as wonderful and mysterious, but also terrifying and incomprehensible. Practicing the art of a reflective and grateful life, they are more likely to commit to the kinds of activity that do not take them out of the materiality or naturalness of life but turn the ordinariness of life's events into "markers of praise and thankfulness before God, the Life of all life."<sup>7</sup> As people learn to pray they are transformed so that their perception and reception of the world can be open to its divine presence. "There is no mere world or matters of fact for covenant theology; there is always the wonder and duty to the concrete moment at hand, where God's illimitable gift of life is given into our hands – to hear and do what is here and now. Theology does not change nature as such, but rather transforms its reception, through spiritual consciousness. Brute facticity remains, while being simultaneously transfigured."<sup>8</sup> Food ceases to register as fuel or as a commodity. Eating becomes a sharing in and a sharing of the blessings of God.

When people learn to become prayerful in their eating by practicing the spiritual exercises of attention and reflection in the kitchen and around a table, the opportunity exists that they will begin to realize – through their touching, smelling, tasting, and seeing – how every bite leads them beyond themselves into the worlds of plants and animals, fields and forests, farmers and cooks. Eating demonstrates that we cannot live alone. Growing food reminds us that we do not create life. Food connects us to the memberships of creation and to God. Thoughtful eating reminds us that there is no human

fellowship without a table, no table without a kitchen, no kitchen without a garden, no garden without viable ecosystems, no ecosystems without the forces productive of life, and no life without its source in God.

A theological understanding of food challenges us to discern the scope and character of the memberships of life, and then find ways to honor and live appropriately within them. To be a creature is to be a member joined with others in the struggles and joys of a common, always given life. To be a creature is to benefit from the help and nurture of others and, in turn, to be a help and source of nurture in return. As long as we care to live, there is no release from our shared life. Eating is the daily confirmation of that fact.

Insofar as our eating becomes Eucharistic, we have the opportunity to turn membership into communion. God calls creatures made in the image of God to be hospitable, to participate in Christ's reconciling ways with the world (Col. 1:20), to eat with justice and mercy, and in doing so participate in the divine hospitality that first brought creation into being and daily sustains it.

#### Notes

1. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 83.
2. Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should be Good, Clean, and Fair* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2007).
3. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), Book 6:3:g, 377.
4. Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 229.
5. Steven Weinberg, "Without God," *New York Review of Books*, 55:14 (September 25, 2008). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/sep/25/without-god/>
6. Bruce V. Foltz, "Nature's Other Side: The Demise of Nature and the Phenomenology of Givenness," in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodean (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 334.
7. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 119.
8. *Ibid.*, 123.

“ Food ceases to register as fuel or as a commodity. Eating becomes a sharing in and a sharing of the blessings of God.”

## REVIEW: NORMAN WIRZBA'S *Food and Faith & Living the Sabbath*

Tim Schubert

Tim Schubert, plant pathologist at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, delivered a lecture in our *Justice and the Environment* series this semester, "Confused Consumers: What is the True Cost of Our Food?" Here he offers a review of two of Norman Wirzba's books discussed in our *Readings in Faith and Culture* group this fall.

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*Living the Sabbath - Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, is one of seven books in the "Christian Practice of Everyday Life" series from Brazos Press. For me personally, a suitable subtitle might be *Here's What You've Been Missing*. Judging from some of the reading group discussion focusing on just three chapters from this volume (1-Losing Our Way, 4-The Practice of Delight, and 11-Sabbath Environmentalism), I am not alone in thinking this way. Wirzba does not come across as one who has mastered "living the Sabbath." He sets the stage by identifying our modern default behavior as the frantic and exhausting pursuit of more - more income, more possessions, more space, more liberties, more fame. Fellow pilgrim Wirzba suggests the initial corrective step is quite radical, but neither new nor easy - just stop. From this still vantage point, we allow ourselves a rare opportunity to take delight in the vast and mysterious Creation of which we are a part. Out of this delight flows admiration, gratitude, and an authentic motivation to care for what God has made and continues to make. This is Sabbath - a rhythmic work, rest and celebration cycle that conveys the message to the world and ourselves that the God we worship desires our collective good and He desires that we experience joy. Much more than a "no work on Sunday" sort of Sabbath, here we encounter a persuasive argument that encourages us to build a Sabbath mindset into every day, every task, and every moment. In step with the pre- and post-Fall command to honor the Sabbath, to keep it holy, now we begin to see Sabbath as something we are working toward, a goal, a dress rehearsal for Heaven. The discipline and practice of Sabbath

thinking leads us to a delightful relationship with God and Creation, giving us purpose, relieving our anxieties, elevating truth and gratitude, while suppressing the pride and selfish ambition that has been slowly grinding us to exhaustion. We receive a living faith that assures us repeatedly that our God desires that we have joy in this life, so much so that He not only points the way, He leads, empowers, and provides for us on the journey. I could not help but think of that comforting passage in Isaiah 30:15 and 19-21. "This is the way; walk in it."

*Food and Faith - A Theology of Eating*, the second of Wirzba's books from which we read this semester, provided still more food for thought (pun intended). The reading group specifically addressed Chapter 1 (Thinking Theologically about Food) and Chapter 4 (Life through Death - Sacrificial Eating). Largely due to the growing industrialization of food production, our concepts of food have become in Wirzba's vocabulary, "decontextualized." We no longer recognize our food as a gift, as a sacrifice calling for hospitality, communion, or nurture and celebration. Instead, we wrongly view our food merely as fuel, a commodity under our complete control, a manufactured product that, as Wendell Berry reminds us, we assume simply comes forth because we have the money to buy it. Bereft of any personal involvement with food production and increasingly, even its preparation, it is not surprising that we fail in our fundamental understanding of food and its true costs. How can we judge the sustainability of our food production practices, the quality of our stewardship of the land, and whether our treatment of resources, people, and the whole of creation are fair and just, when we are so disconnected from our life-sustaining nutrition? The result of applying strictly capitalistic and profit-driven motives to agriculture is a state of complicit exploitation of resources and people, and heavy dependence on foreign markets and international trade agreements. The chapter on "Life through Death" was good preparation to hear Anna Peterson's talk,

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“What Do Christians Say About Eating Animals?” Wirzba reminds us that every act of eating is sacrificial. Without the death of other creatures (microbes, insects, plants, animals), we have no food, and without food we cannot live. Wirzba also argues that every act of eating points ultimately to the “self-giving” God who gives himself in Christ. Not only do the sacrificial meals of the Old Testament point to Christ, every meal, in which an animal gives its life that we might live, points to Christ, who, through his death, has become our food, our nourishment, our life.

Eating with gratitude for the gifts of the self-giving God, in turn, leads us also to give ourselves in service to others. In truth, self-offering, or taking up our cross and following Christ, leads to life as it really ought to be, with living sacrifice for the good of others as both the way of and the way to God, the path to eternal life (John 12:25). The sacrificial altar is for giving back, a place where an act of self-offering love occurs. The act of eating reinforces the idea that we are not the sources of our own lives, or any other life for that matter. Sin, then, is refusing self-offering. Wirzba writes:

“Christians sacrifice truly when they cease to strategize to appease or bribe God. Their offerings become genuine when they are no longer made out

of fear or anxiety, or with the hope of consolidating position and glory in the world. Instead, Christian sacrifice is about learning how to make one’s life into a gift that creates communion.”

Having disconnected ourselves from food production, it becomes easy to think that we eat cheaply, ignoring the suffering and death that marks the diet of every one of us. Accepting the *entire* gift of life, including the sacrifice of Christ for us and our own self-giving for others, obliges us in the practical sense to do our best, to treat all members and facets of creation with utmost kindness and good will, providing all things necessary for their health, flourishing, and sustainability. Adopting, on the one hand, the spiritual disciplines of feasting so that we don’t forget the manifold blessings of this world, and, on the other hand, the spiritual disciplines of fasting so that we don’t abuse or hoard the good gifts of God will assist us in glorifying God and not ourselves in our eating. This is good, sound counsel from a fellow Christian and author that has given much thought to the theology of eating, and shares his insights with extraordinary clarity and humility.



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## *Inside this Edition*

ESSAY: Eating as a "Spiritual Exercise"  
by Norman Wirzba

*With a view towards the Creator, Wirzba offers how thoughtful eating can help us find ways to honor God and his creation through attention, conversation, gratitude, and honest accounting.*  
(See p. 1)

REVIEW: Norman Wirzba's *Food and Faith* and *Living the Sabbath*  
by Tim Schubert

*The fall reading group at the Christian Study Center read both of these books. Tim, one of our speakers for our Justice and the Environment series and long time friend of the Center, offers a review and his own personal reflection on Wirzba's books.*  
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POEM FOR ADVENT: "Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond all Splendour"  
by Frank Houghton (See p. 4)

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