



Thinking Theologically about Food

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.¹

To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that “something more” is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life.²

Why did God create a world in which every living creature must eat?

This is a humbling, even terrifying, question, particularly for people who are intimately involved in the finding, growing, and harvesting of food. Eating is no idle or trifling activity. It is the means of life itself – but also death. For any creature to live, countless seen and unseen others must die, often by being eaten themselves. Life as we know it *depends* on death, *needs* death, which means that death is not simply the cessation of life but its precondition. Death is eating’s steadfast accomplice. It is also each creature’s biological end, for no matter how much or how well we eat (for the sake of life’s preservation), we cannot erase our mortal condition.³ Why eat if eating, even vegetarian eating,

¹ Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: North Point Press, 1981), 281.

² Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963), 16.

³ In this book, I assume that eating is originally part of God’s good creation. Though eating takes on a different character after the fall, it is not itself an effect or sign of a fallen creation. Did pre-fall eating entail death? The biblical story is not clear about this. Genesis 2–3 suggests that we are not immortal by nature but must constantly receive life as a gift (Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden precisely so they would not have access to the tree of life and live forever). I discuss the meanings of death and its relation to food in Chapter 4.

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implicates us in so much death? Why eat if eating is the daily reminder of our own need and mortality?

We could try to imagine all creatures as self-subsisting, noneating entities that never take a bite, and thus presumably avoid the realities of eating death. But then we would also have to envision a tasteless and lonely world without belonging and fellowship, a world without the varied delights that accompany the procuring, preparing, and sharing of food. Eating joins people to each other, to other creatures and the world, and to God through forms of “natural communion” too complex to fathom.⁴ It introduces us to a graced world of hospitality, a creation that from the beginning (and constantly through its soil) absorbs death and makes room for newness of life. Eating involves us in a daily life and death drama in which, beyond all comprehension, some life is sacrificed so that other life can thrive. It establishes a membership that confirms all creatures as profoundly in need of each other and upon God to provide life’s nutrition and vitality.

Food is a holy and humbling mystery. Every time a creature eats it participates in God’s life-giving yet costly ways, ways that simultaneously affirm creation as a delectable gift, and as a divinely ordered membership of interdependent need and suffering and help. Whenever people come to the table they demonstrate with the unmistakable evidence of their stomachs that they are not self-subsisting gods. They are finite and mortal creatures dependent on God’s many good gifts: sunlight, photosynthesis, decomposition, soil fertility, water, bees and butterflies, chickens, sheep, cows, gardeners, farmers, cooks, strangers, and friends (the list goes on and on). Eating reminds us that we participate in a grace-saturated world, a blessed creation worthy of attention, care, and celebration. Despite what food marketers may say, there really is no such thing as “cheap” or “convenient” food. Real food, the food that is the source of creaturely health and delight, is precious because it is a fundamental means through which God’s nurture and love for the whole creation are expressed.

The biblical wisdom writer Joshua ben Sira understood better than most that the world we share is an awe-inspiring and terror-inducing place. Creation is marvelous and desirable – think of how much of it tastes so good – but it is also fierce and strange, capable of poisoning or killing us despite our best efforts to be careful. Joshua ben Sira observed that creation

⁴ In *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), Sergei Bulgakov says, “The boundary between living and nonliving is actually removed in food. Food is natural communion – partaking of the flesh of the world. When I take food, I am eating world matter in general, and in so doing, I truly and in reality find the world within me and myself in the world, I become part of it” (103).

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forms a vast membership in which each creature is made to supplement the needs and virtues of others, a membership in which God sends down snow and rain and the life-giving light of the sun. Even so, creation is a dangerous place where hailstones, withering heat, and strange sea monsters threaten human securities and pretensions. God “consumes the mountains and burns up the wilderness” (Sirach 43:21). Who can understand this world and this life? Before the immensity and marvel of creation there is always more to say, even as people acknowledge they “could never say enough” (43:27). Or they are simply reduced to silence, offering a faltering praise, while eating their way into mysteries they are unable to comprehend. In a manner reminiscent of Job, Joshua ben Sira wonders where people will find the resources and the wisdom to be faithful to a world in which life depends on so much we don’t understand.

The character and pace of much contemporary life makes it less likely that people will perceive the mystery of food or receive it as a precious gift and sign of God’s sustaining care. Though information about food abounds, many of today’s eaters are among the most ignorant the world has ever known. This is because people lack the sensitivity, imagination, and understanding that come from the growing, preserving, and preparing of food. Not having the attention or skill that develops while working in a garden and kitchen, they also miss the necessary knowledge, affection, and insight. Too many people don’t really know where food comes from or what is practically required (ecologically but also culturally) for food to be healthy and plentiful over the long term. As a result, they risk perpetuating what Wendell Berry has called one of the great superstitions of our consumer age, namely the superstition that “money brings forth food.”⁵

Long ago, Aristotle maintained that for us to know something deeply we must be able to give an account of the “four causes” that come together to make that thing what it is.⁶ On this ancient view, to understand what food is requires that we be able to (1) give a detailed account of the material elements and ecological contexts that come together in any food item and be able to say something about the quality of what is there (material cause); (2) distinguish between differing food items and be able to say why the distinctions matter (formal cause); (3) appreciate the many geo-bio-chemical processes that contribute to a plant or animal’s growth, and the culinary traditions and recipes that enable us to transform raw elements into delicious food (efficient cause);

⁵ Wendell Berry, “In Distrust of Movements,” in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 48.

⁶ Aristotle describes the “four causes” in *Physics* II, 3 and 7 and again as a feature of wisdom in *Metaphysics* I, 2–3.

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and (4) give an answer for why eating matters, providing an account of the many ecological, physiological, and social purposes of food (final cause).

This Aristotelian account is helpful to have in mind because it shows us how much there is to think about when we think about food. It demonstrates that for us to claim an understanding of food we need as much as possible to be intimately involved in its production and preparation. Failing this practical involvement we will not appreciate the many requirements and costs of food, costs that go well beyond the sticker price. We will not know the health benefits (to us and to fellow creatures) that follow from particular kinds of food production and harvest. Nor will we be able to advocate for a just and sustainable food system, a system in which fields and waters are protected, animals are humanely treated, and workers are safe and paid a living wage. To know food with depth we need to know *what* is there, *how* it came to be there, *what* it is for, and *why* it matters that we have it in particular sorts of ways.

To eat is to be implicated in a vast, complex, interweaving set of life and death dramas in which we are only one character among many. No matter how solitary our eating experience may be, every sniff, chomp, and swallow connects us to vast global trade networks and thus to biophysical and social worlds far beyond ourselves. The moment we chew on anything we participate in regional, geographic histories and in biochemical processes that, for all their diversity and complexity, defy our wildest imaginations and most thorough attempts at comprehension. The minute we contemplate or talk about eating, we show ourselves to be involved in culinary traditions and cultural taboos, as well as moral quandaries and spiritual quests. To amend an ecologist's maxim: we can never only bite into one thing.

Food is about the relationships that join us to the earth, fellow creatures, loved ones and guests, and ultimately God. How we eat testifies to whether we value the creatures we live with and depend upon. To eat is to savor *and* struggle with the mystery of creatureliness. When our eating is mindful, we celebrate the goodness of fields, gardens, forests and watersheds, and the skill of those who can nurture seed and animal life into delicious food. We acknowledge and honor God as the giver of every good and perfect gift. But we also learn to correct our own arrogance, boredom, and ingratitude. Eating invites people to develop a deeper appreciation for where they are and who they are with so that their eating can be a sacramental rather than a sacrilegious act. A thoughtful, theological relation to food makes possible the discovery that eating is among the most intimate and pleasing ways possible for us to enter into the memberships of creation and find there the God who daily blesses and feeds life.

NAMING AND NARRATING A WORLD OF FOOD

The way we think about food depends on how we name and narrate the world in which we eat. Food does not simply appear, nor is everything food. It is a chosen and named entity that draws its significance from the wider contexts in which it appears. To appreciate the significance of naming, consider the difference between calling a plant a “weed,” a “flower,” or a “fruit.” Any of these names carries with it a set of dispositions and responses that have widely different effects. So too with the world as a whole. How we name and narrate it will greatly affect how we relate to it.

How should we name the world? One very common, though by no means simple, way is to describe it as the realm of “nature.”⁷ A great number of meanings have been attached to this word because what we think about the natural world depends on the time and culture we are in. For some, nature refers to the world apart from human artifice and culture. As such, it finds its most pristine form in wilderness, a place where people may occasionally visit but are not expected or encouraged to stay.⁸ For others, nature is the stage for human action, the place where the natural resources (wood, oil, water, etc.) we need to fuel and feed our lives can be found. In this view, nature resembles something like a massive warehouse or store. Though it exists in its own right, one of its key functions and primary sources of value is its ability to service human needs and desires. For yet others, nature is the cleansing place where the pretensions and distortions of culture can be seen and corrected. According to this view, people go to nature so they can discover what is essential to a good human life.

The science that has been used to describe nature has also varied greatly through time. In his classic study *The Idea of Nature*, R. G. Collingwood

⁷ In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Raymond Williams observed that nature is “perhaps the most complex word in the language” (219). It encompasses the essential quality of a thing, the inherent force active in things, and the material realm of things themselves. If we focus only on its third aspect we soon discover that the natural world can be described in various, even contradictory, ways, ranging from the relatively benign and life-giving Mother Nature to the cut-throat arena of Tennyson’s “nature red in tooth and claw.”

⁸ It is important to note how “unnatural” the term wilderness is since it has an extensive cultural history. For an excellent brief history of the term in its American context, see William Cronon’s essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996). Cronon shows how “wilderness” underwrites narratives about nature as the “frontier” and the realm of the “sublime.” Wilderness could thus act as a cathedral to inspire worship and as the evil domain that needs to be tamed and subdued. For a more extended and detailed discussion, see Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

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observed that Greek natural science understood the world to be permeated by mind or *nous*. The presence of mind, sometimes characterized as divine, accounted for the regularity and order we see. Here the whole world is akin to an organic body with the principles of intelligence internal to itself. Beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a distinctly modern view of science emerged that cast the world as a machine. As such, the world is devoid of its own intelligence and value. Though it operates according to natural laws that can be understood and manipulated, the world's intelligibility and reason for being exist wholly outside itself. Toward the end of the eighteenth century a view of science developed that took as its model for the world not an organic body or a machine but the social processes of historical development. Central to this model is the idea that nature's elements, much like a society's members and institutions, are constantly changing and on the move. Nature is dynamic and unfixed. There is little about it that is "natural" in the sense of being essentially the same through time.⁹

More recently we see that some scientists have called into question the idea of the intelligibility of nature itself. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, argues that scientific research gives us a "rather chilling" picture because it yields a world that is pointless:

Not only do we not find any point to life laid out for us in nature, no objective basis for our moral principles, no correspondence between what we think is the moral law and the laws of nature, of the sort imagined by philosophers from Anaximander and Plato to Emerson. We even learn that the emotions that we most treasure, our love for our wives and husbands and children, are made possible by chemical processes in our brains that are what they are as the result of natural selection acting on chance mutations over millions of years.¹⁰

If the whole universe, and thus also the minds attempting to think about it, are the effect of accidental motion, then the conclusion that the world has meaning or value cannot be trusted. A random world should evoke no admiration. Nor should an accidental mind garner our respect. In Weinberg's view, we will have finally become honest about the world and ourselves when we "get out of the habit of worshipping anything."

This brief tour of some of nature's narrations demonstrates that an account of the world's meaning or significance is not provided alongside it. Though we find ourselves in a world, why it matters or what it is for are not similarly

⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

¹⁰ 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/>

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given. The meaning and purpose of the world are something people must work out in their interactions with it. As we have just seen, the meanings can differ widely. For some the world is an organism that has integrity that can be violated. For others it is a machine that can be manipulated at will because its value is entirely of an instrumental sort. For yet others, the ideas of meaning and value are themselves fictions and so are not to be taken with much seriousness. Each narration of the world calls forth different kinds of expectations and responsibilities in us: we might show respect, reverence, and restraint, or we might calculate ownership, control, and profit, or we might simply be bored and comfortably numb. Whichever narration we live by will have decisive significance for what we think about food and how we relate to our food-providing world.

A theological account names and narrates the world as “creation.” Though not necessarily opposed to scientific narrations as nature, a narration of the world as creation means that our descriptions of the world’s members and our telling of the meaning of the world’s movements must always be articulated with reference to God as the world’s source, sustenance, and end.¹¹ Understood as creation, the world is not a random accident nor is it valueless matter waiting for us to give it significance. It is, rather, the concrete expression of God’s hospitable love making room for what is not God to be and to flourish. Theologically understood, food is not reducible to material stuff. It is the provision and nurture of God made pleasing and delectable. It is the daily reminder that life and death come to us as gifts.

The doctrine of creation is a rich teaching that has wide-ranging implications for how we think of ourselves, the world, and our place (and responsibilities) within it. It touches on how the world began, why the world is at all, why it has the character that it does, and what it might mean for the world to be whole and perfect.¹² Narrated in a Christian way, creation is intimately bound up with the Trinitarian life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹³

¹¹ For an excellent treatment of how differing biblical accounts of creation compare to scientific findings, see William P. Brown’s *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² I have developed aspects of the character of creation in *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹³ The idea that creation is a Trinitarian act has a long history in Christian thought. It has its root in scriptural passages (like John’s prologue) that refer to Jesus Christ as the Word through whom all things came into being. Irenaeus (in *Against Heresies* 5.28.4) described God as creating with “two hands,” the Word and the Spirit. Others, like Basil the Great, referred to Psalm 33:6, which reads: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.” Though Trinitarian creation is presented as a unified act, the presence of Three Persons allows for distinctions to be made. Irenaeus put it this way: the Father plans and commands, the Son performs and creates, while the Spirit

The event or happening of creation cannot (as deists supposed) be confined to something that occurred only long ago at the beginning. Creation, what we might also call the place and work of divine creativity, is ongoing because the life of God is ongoing. Moreover, the life of creatures is in some sense a participation in the divine life because it is only the animating presence (Spirit or breath) of God to creatures that keeps them from returning to the dust from which they came (Psalm 104:29).

If the world is named as creation, and creation is narrated in a Trinitarian way, then the movement of the world must always be understood and evaluated in terms of the “movement” between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Considering the Trinity, and thereby glimpsing something of the character and significance of the relations operative there, we gain the perspective we need to evaluate the relationships that constitute our world today. As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, if God creates a world, God also communicates God’s own Trinitarian love as the basis and goal of created life. “The vitality and freedom of eternal love in the realm of Divine Being constitutes the prototype for what love can be, at its best, in the realm of creaturely existence and development.”¹⁵ In speaking this way, Balthasar is drawing on a theological tradition that understands the love operating among the Three Persons to be the same love that creates, sustains, and redeems the world.¹⁶ This means that if we want to know what creaturely life is, what it means and what it is for, we must look to the life of the Triune God.

Miroslav Volf has rightly reminded us that it is a mistake to think that Trinitarian relations can be easily or directly translated into a social program.

nourishes and increases. These distinctions, however, must not be understood in a rigid way lest one imagine three different gods.

¹⁴ It is important to underscore that God’s eternal Trinitarian life is always a mystery to us. Whatever Christians claim to understand about God’s life is dependent on God’s revelation to us in the witness of Israel and the incarnate Son. Jesus Christ is the image or icon of God (Col. 1:15), and so is our “window” into the divine life. Our capacity to see, however, is limited by the power of sin in us.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama – Theological Dramatic Theory: Volume V, The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 79–80.

¹⁶ Balthasar quotes Thomas Aquinas: “Thus God the Father effects creation by his Word, who is the Son, and by his love, who is the Holy Spirit. Thus it is the processions of the Persons that cause the generation of creatures, to the extent that they include attributes of being, namely, of knowing and willing” (ibid., 62); and Bonaventure: “God could not have brought forth the creation on the basis of his will if he had not already brought forth the Son on the basis of his nature” (ibid., 64). Balthasar summarizes their position by saying “All earthly becoming is a reflection of the eternal ‘happening’ in God, which, we repeat, is per se identical with the eternal Being or essence” (ibid., 67). It is important to describe the Trinitarian movement of love as a “happening” rather than a “becoming” because the divine life, quite unlike our own, is not susceptible to lack or restlessness. The Trinity is the fullness of life, life at peace. But it is not inert because it is the eternal movement of self-offering and receiving communion.

The world we live in is fallen. Sin has distorted and disfigured the creaturely relationships that were originally whole, good, and beautiful. Too much of our “love” is really an idolatrous desire to possess and control. It is important to note, however, that though sin has done much to de-create the relationships of this world, it does not have the power to block altogether God’s presence to the world. God is ever present to the world as its sustaining breath or Spirit, drawing creatures into the fullness of life. God has assumed creaturely flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth so that our flesh can know and participate in God’s own life. We should, therefore, conclude with Volf that while the Trinity does not yield a specific plan of action, it does give the contours of a vision for what relations between creatures ought to be. The witness of the Son, the leading of the Spirit, and the nurture of the church body together make possible a new life individuals could not achieve on their own.

Considering the life of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit it becomes evident that the goal of creaturely relationship is achieved in *communion*. Though life under the power of sin can fall into patterns of fragmentation, isolation, and violent destruction, the witness of the Trinity is that life attains its fulfillment in a fellowship of peace and love. The Three Persons of the Trinity do not exist in splendid isolation from each other, as if they were three mini-gods each claiming for themselves their own sphere of power and influence. Rather, the Father, Son, and Spirit exist *with* each other in radical equality and unity. Basil the Great insisted on the use of the word “with” because he believed it testified best to the communion (*koinonia*) among Persons.¹⁷ In the Trinity there is no subordination or hierarchy. Rather, the Three share life with each other in complete mutuality. Though the Persons are distinct, they always abide in each other. This mutual abiding would eventually be described as *perichoresis*, the one “making room” in itself for the other.

Perichoresis is a radical teaching. It suggests that persons do not first exist as individuals and then at some time enter into relationship with each other (thus making relationship an optional affair), or even that they are always marked by interdependence. Trinitarian life shows that relationality goes much deeper, *constituting* rather than merely marking reality. Volf indicates that the divine persons “are not simply interdependent and influence one another from outside, but are *personally interior* to one another.”¹⁸ In other words, mutual indwelling, the other-in-me and myself-in-another, is at the

¹⁷ My understanding of Basil and the power of the Spirit as the agent of communion is based on Denis Edwards’s *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 16–30.

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity Is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology*, 14:3 (July 1998), 409.

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heart of true reality. True life is lived *through* the gifts of others. As our experience with eating confirms, insofar as a living being attempts to be autarchic (a self-originating and self-sustaining being) it denies all nurture and so precipitates its own death.

Perichoresis speaks to interpenetration without this penetration being a violation. When Jesus says “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38) he does not mean that each dissolves into each other and so ceases to be who they are. Rather, they are who they are because of the presence of each other *in* each other. “The relationship between Jesus and the Father is not one of master and subordinate (or slave) but a relationship of perfect friendship or partnership in which the will of one naturally aligns with the other; here obedience follows from perfect fellowship (John 15:15).”¹⁹ This Trinitarian view of reality, this narration of the inspiration and goal of relationships, results in a striking portrait of what it means to be a self: “The self is shaped by making space for the other and by giving space to the other, by being enriched when it inhabits the other and by sharing of its plenitude when it is inhabited by the other, by re-examining itself when the other closes his or her doors and challenging the other by knocking at the doors.”²⁰ To be a personal creature is thus to be one who is from the beginning shaped by and called into hospitality and fellowship. Trinitarian creation means that life is founded upon an unending sharing and receiving of each other, a perpetual “making room” within ourselves for others to be. Rather than being a possession, life is a gift – a movement of self-offering and receiving love.

These brief comments on the Trinity reveal that it is a teaching of the utmost existential and practical significance. Far from being an abstract and arcane doctrine, what the Trinity accomplishes is a rethinking of the world and our place within it. *Why does a world exist?* Because it is of the nature of divine love to “make room” for others to be and to flourish. Love delights in a world that by being itself contributes to the goodness and beauty of life. *What is the character of the world?* The world consists not of individuals but of memberships that in the joining of members to each other make life possible. Membership is not optional. The relationships we live through – most obviously and practically through our eating – constitute, inspire, nurture, and

¹⁹ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 186. Tanner is right to stress the “perfect fellowship” that marks the Father-Son relationship. The language of “alignment,” however, can be misleading if it is taken to suggest that at one time there were two independent spheres of life out of alignment that then gradually moved into alignment. Here we encounter one of the central difficulties in thinking the Trinity, namely, the need to maintain the distinctness and the unity of the Three Persons.

²⁰ Wolf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program,” 410.