

FOOD AND FAITH  
Second Edition

This book provides a comprehensive theological framework for assessing the significance of eating. Drawing on diverse theological, philosophical, and anthropological insights, it offers fresh ways to evaluate food production and consumption practices as they are being worked out in today's industrial food economy. Unlike books that focus primarily on vegetarianism and hunger-related concerns, this book broadens the scope of consideration to include the sacramental character of eating, the deep significance of hospitality, the meaning of death and sacrifice, the Eucharist as the place of inspiration and orientation, the importance of saying grace, and the possibility of eating in heaven. Throughout, eating is presented as a way of enacting fidelity between persons, between people and fellow creatures, and between people and Earth. *Food and Faith* demonstrates that eating is of profound economic, moral, and spiritual significance.

Revised throughout, this edition includes a new introduction and two new chapters, as well as updated footnotes. The additions add significantly to the core idea of creaturely membership and hospitality through discussion of the microbiome revolution in science, and the daunting challenge of the Anthropocene.

Norman Wirzba is Gilbert T. Rowe Distinguished Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, and a senior fellow at Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics. His first edition of *Food and Faith* was named "Book of the Year" by the Englewood Review of Books, and earned "Honorable Mention" in the 2011 PROSE Award. Wirzba's other books include *From Nature to Creation*, *Way of Love*, *Making Peace with the Land*, *Living the Sabbath*, and *The Paradise of God*, and he is the editor for a book series on the "New Agrarianism."

# Food and Faith

*A Theology of Eating*

**Second Edition**

**NORMAN WIRZBA**

Duke University



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*For Ingrid and Alex Wirzba*



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## Foreword

I must confess, I did not want to know much of what I learned by reading this book. Indeed I found it somewhat painful. In these pages, Norman Wirzba writes about what seems to be our unrelenting desire to degrade God's good creation. But Wirzba is a gentle soul and he has written a beautiful book. That is no small achievement because much of what he has to describe is incessantly ugly. Yet Wirzba has found a way to help us see that by the grace of God we can still learn to live lives of gratitude.

The painfulness I found in reading this book resides in my desire to remain ignorant. I do not want to know how my everyday eating habits make me complicit with cruel treatment of animals. I do not want to know that the way I have learned to eat contributes to the ongoing degradation of the land. I do not want to know how the way my food is produced puts an unjust burden on people who often have no food to eat at all. In truth, I vaguely "knew" about these realities but Wirzba knows how to bring them to my attention in a manner that demands I must acknowledge them. Acknowledgment can be excruciating.

Do not be fooled by the admirable modesty that pervades Wirzba's prose. This is a book of great philosophical and theological depth but its strength has largely to do with Wirzba's "method," which does not call attention to itself. By directing our attention to one of the most common aspects of our lives – that is, eating – Wirzba makes us recognize the fundamental character of our lives.

Put simply, he reminds us that we eat to stay alive but we must kill if we are to eat. So "eating is the daily reminder of creaturely mortality." Again, I may have "known" that before reading *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* but Wirzba has now forced me to recognize that the lives we live require the death of creaturely life. For that is what we are – creatures bound together. To understand this forces the recognition that we live through sacrifice.

That Wirzba has forced me to know what I did not want to know I attribute to how he has shown that the ontological commitments that are constituted by our eating require theological display. In the past, when asked by a skeptic, “Why should I be moral?,” I have replied, “Do you like to eat?” My response was meant to challenge my interlocutor’s question by confronting the assumption that “morality” is clearly to be distinguished from the most basic aspects of our lives. I did not realize, however, until I read Wirzba, that my reply was also one that might make sense in response to the question “Why should I believe in God?”

Too often, attempts to bring a theological perspective to issues involving “the environmental crisis” force “God” to fill in a gap. The “gap” may not be Newton’s but the results are often similar to Newton’s attempt to rescue some role for God once physics had done its job. Wirzba has avoided that trap by helping us see that our theological convictions are not “explanations” but rather constitutive of the conditions that make life possible. Put concretely, Wirzba helps us see that if we are to talk of God we had better know how to talk about dirt.

Not only must we know how to talk about dirt but we must recognize that we live through sacrifice. The meal we call Eucharist rightly, therefore, becomes the center of Wirzba’s book. For it is by partaking of this meal, made possible by Christ’s death and resurrection, that we can imagine what it might mean to be reconciled with our mortality. And so reconciled we have some hope of being in communion with the gifts we call creation.

I am confident that anyone reading this remarkably learned book will be grateful for Wirzba’s labor. For here Wirzba demonstrates the palpable connection between how we eat and our worship of the Triune God.

Stanley Hauerwas

Gilbert T. Rowe Distinguished Professor of Christian Theology, Emeritus  
Duke Divinity School

## Preface

Several years ago, on a warm fall evening at Anathoth Community Garden in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, I enjoyed a memorable meal. Roughly 100 people had gathered for a community feast. Though some of the meal was prepared by cooks from Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, the rest was potluck, and so included some of the freshest and best-tasting greens, tortillas, salsa, and chicken I have ever had. As our backdrop, we enjoyed a double rainbow on a massive thundercloud to the east, while the sun slowly made its way down the horizon behind us. Children were running around blowing and catching bubbles. Others danced to the sound of a live bluegrass band. The taste of delectable food, the sounds of laughter and singing, the aroma of fresh flowers and harvest, the hugs of friends and neighbors, and the sensation of a cooling fall night all came together in what I considered a foretaste of heaven.

Why should I or anyone else think that this meal mattered? Is the invocation of heaven not overdrawn? After all, the evening has passed, and the physical sensations are no longer effective in me. No matter how much or how finely I eat, I, along with all the other animal and plant bodies, will still die, and so return to the soil out of which we came and upon which we daily feed. But what if that night and the communion it enacted is indeed a glimpse, however imperfect, of what life ultimately is meant to be?

In this book I develop a theological account of eating, a framework for assessing eating's immediate and ultimate significance. Though it is possible to describe food and eating in countless ways, from a Christian point of view what food is and why eating matters are best understood in terms of God's own Trinitarian life of gift and sacrifice, hospitality and communion, care and celebration. Trinitarian theology asserts that all reality is communion – the giving and receiving of gifts – because it has its source and sustenance in the eternal Triune love described by theologians as *perichoresis*, a making



room within oneself for another to be. This means that nothing in creation exists by itself, in terms of itself, or for itself. Creatures are marked from beginning to end by the need to receive the gifts of nurture. Inspired by Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we have the opportunity to turn our homes into places of hospitality and ourselves into nurture for others. At its best, eating is a sharing and welcoming movement that makes room for others. Insofar as people learn to live in hospitable ways with each other and within their places, they participate in the eternal, hospitable ways of God that daily create, sustain, and fulfill life.

According to this theological view, we don't really understand food until we perceive, receive, and taste it in terms of its origin and end in God as the one who provides for, communes with, and ultimately reconciles creation. *Food is God's love made nutritious and delicious, given for the good of each other.* The mundane act of eating is thus a daily invitation to move responsibly and gratefully within this given life. It is a summons to commune with the divine Life that is presupposed and made manifest in every bite.

This claim will be difficult to swallow for people who are convinced that food consists of little more than a bundle of nutrients that we simply need to get in the right quantities, variety, and proportion. According to this view, food is primarily a fuel we need to keep our machine-like bodies running at an optimal level. Though some food may taste better than other food, there is little about it that should give us cause for wonder or reverence. Though people in the past may have stopped to say grace before eating a meal, today's educated eater is taught that food is simply a manufactured product that we control.

This is an impoverished description of food. While it is certainly true that we can speak of bread as a collection of material elements (water, salt, yeast, flour), reducing food to this level is like opening a letter and judging it to be nothing more than a page covered with random markings. Rather than reading the marks "I LOVE YOU!" to communicate a life-altering pronouncement inviting a response, all one sees are characters on a page worthy of little more than a passing notice.

Similarly, we can look at a meal and see only a random assortment of nutrients, oblivious to the grace of God made manifest in it. We can forget that food is one of God's basic and abiding means for expressing divine provision and care. To partake of a meal is to participate in a divine communication in which God the eternal Host says something like, "I love you, I want you to be well taken care of, I want to share with you the joys of my life." The Psalmist (104:10–15) puts it this way:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,  
giving drink to every wild animal . . .  
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth,  
and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine,  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.<sup>1</sup>

To grow food and eat in a way that is mindful of God is to collaborate with God's own primordial sharing of life in the sharing of food with each other. It is to participate in forms of life and frameworks of meaning that have their root and orientation in God's caring ways with creation.

It takes education, a catechesis within particular communities and traditions, to enable a person to see that the marks on a page are actually words that, if one has the requisite intelligence, sympathy, and imagination, can convey a wide range of meanings. Sometimes these meanings are shallow or of merely temporary interest. But other times they are profound and personally transformative. Knowing the difference is part of what it means to be a good reader. Though one may learn to read, the possibility always exists that one will be indolent, inattentive, or indifferent; the reader sees the words but has not really digested them. How many people have dismissed poetry simply because they did not know how to read the words?

In a similar manner, eaters can consume a wide variety of foods and not really savor any of it as God's love made nurture for us. To eat with theological appreciation presupposes an ability to "read" food as the nutritious manifestation of God's love for the world. It is to be in the world in a posture of reverence for fellow creatures freshly engaged as the work of God's hands. This posture entails a process of spiritual formation in which we allow God the Gardener (Genesis 2:8) to conform us to his image as the one who looks after and provides for creatures. In the daily act of eating, people have the opportunity to appreciate and explore their creaturely condition as beings dependent on each other and upon God. In the work of food's production and consumption, people have the chance to learn where and who they are by becoming tillers and keepers of God's edible garden (Genesis 2:15). Without this ongoing catechesis we run the risk of reducing the gift of food and the grace of eating to a desecration. We risk

<sup>1</sup> All references to scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

undermining the ecological and cultural conditions necessary for healthy and convivial life together.

In advanced industrial societies, where speed, convenience, and cheap prices have become the most valued characteristics in food consumption, it is hardly surprising that eating has become thoughtless and irresponsible. Though everyone chews, relatively few eat with much understanding of or sympathy for the widespread destruction of the world's agricultural lands and communities, or the misery of billions of factory-produced chickens, sheep, pigs, and cattle. Today's handling of food does not often go much beyond concerns for its appearance, availability, and price. In our global economy food is a commodity much like any other, serving the business need for profit, the consumer desire for cheapness, and the political quest for power. In this context, food ceases to speak as the grace of God. Eating ceases to be the occasion through which we experience life as a membership of belonging, responsibility, and gratitude.

Can a theology of eating be of help? My hope is that the theological account I give in this book will enable us to see and taste food in fresh ways, and that this theological vision will inform the ways we grow and share food. The Psalmist invites us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). The goodness of creation, its delectability but also God's delight in its flavors cannot really dawn on us so long as we reduce food to a product of our own hands or turn it into a commodity for purposes of power and profit. Food is a gift of God given to all creatures for the purposes of life's nurture, sharing, and celebration. When it is done in the name of God, eating is the earthly realization of God's eternal communion-building love.

#### HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

In calling this book a theology of eating, two things need to be kept in mind. First, this is *a* theology of eating rather than *the* theology of eating. As an exercise in constructive theology, it has become abundantly clear to me that what I am doing is offering a theological "picture" that represents a particular Christian view. It is not the only picture that can be drawn. Given the depth and mystery that eating is, other Christians, as well as those who represent different faith traditions, will see and taste food differently. I develop theological themes like the garden, sin, sacrifice, Eucharist, hospitality, reconciliation, and communion so that the scope and significance of creaturely membership can be more readily understood. My development of these themes is hardly exhaustive. I invite others to draw them out differently and in ways that widen our appreciation of eating and food.

Second, this is a work of *theology*. It is not an explicit or developed “ethics of eating.” This is not to say that ethical issues or practical concerns are absent from this work.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the welfare of habitats and animals, farmers and food workers, is never far from my mind. What I have not done, however, is provide detailed analyses of the research being done by scientists (in nutrition, chemistry, biology, and ecology), social scientists (in anthropology, sociology, politics, gender studies, history, and economics), and artists and philosophers that are the prerequisites for a formal ethics of eating. As important as these topics are, I do not focus on genetic engineering and the patenting of foods, or on the justice of regional and global trade agreements, though I do hope that what I say in a theological mode sheds some light on these topics.

The topic of vegetarianism, though also much in my mind (and in the minds of a growing number of people), does not receive developed treatment in this book. The main reason for this is that detailed work has been and is being done on this topic by theologians like Stephen Webb, David Grumett, Rachel Muers, and Michael Northcott.<sup>3</sup> For readers interested in pursuing the complexities of this debate, abundant resources are already on hand. This book serves as a contribution to the debate by drawing a wider theological context in which questions about death, sacrifice, self-offering, and gratitude – all topics vitally related to a consideration of vegetarianism – are developed.

I believe a theology of eating to be especially important at this time. Why? Because the market forces now determining much of the world’s production, distribution, and consumption of food degrade, sicken, and destroy life. At a time when plant and animal creatures are being reduced to “natural resources” or “units of production,” it is crucial that people learn to recover a sense of life’s sacred dimension, and thus receive food as a precious gift. In this work, Christians have much to learn from other religious and

<sup>2</sup> There is vigorous debate in theology and philosophy on the relation between theory and practice. See the collections *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) and *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom*, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) for an indication of the diverse ways in which thinking is transformed by lived practices.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Webb’s *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001) and David Grumett and Rachel Muers’ *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010) and their coedited work *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008). The last is a particularly impressive collection that encompasses biblical, historical, philosophical, and theological perspectives. For a Jewish consideration, see Richard Schwartz’s *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (New York: Lantern Books, 2001).

indigenous traditions. As this book hopes to show, they also have deep sources of insight and inspiration within their own scriptures and theological traditions to share.

For this second edition I have added an Introduction, an opening chapter on fidelity, and an epilogue on faithful eating. I have also expanded on specific themes in various chapters and brought footnotes more up to date. I have written the Introduction because the experience of eating calls for a revised understanding of what we understand human beings to be. Too often, people assume that people exist as separable, independent beings apart from others. We are individuals who then decide to engage others in particular sorts of ways. This is a profound error. When we consider humans as touching and tasting beings, we discover that we have never been alone, and could not ever be singular. Recent research on the human microbiome demonstrates that our bodies are from the beginning, and always, sites of hospitality that, by eating food, nurture countless microorganisms that also nurture us. The paramount question, given this insight, is whether or not in our physiological dependence on others we at the same time practice the kind of fidelity that acknowledges, respects, and honors those we depend on. To eat is to exist in relationships with others that are of the profoundest intimacy. To eat is to know that we are bound to others in a shared and common fate. For our shared fate to be good and beautiful, we must learn to cultivate the forms of fidelity that promote mutual nurture and wellbeing. That is what Chapter 1 is about.

Chapter 2 explores why eating is a moral and theological issue. It examines how our thinking about food has been rendered shallow by the modern narration and reduction of it to a commodity. My focus is on both the decontextualization of food, by which I mean a society's disassociation of food from ecological and productive contexts, and the industrialization of eating, by which I mean the intervention of market and machine logics into the eating act. These developments, I argue, lead to a spiritually impoverished understanding of food that can be corrected once we begin to think of eating as a "spiritual exercise."

Chapter 3 develops the ecological and creaturely context for eating by describing humanity's identity and vocation in a garden. I argue that gardens are indispensable for the flourishing of terrestrial life because gardens and the geo-bio-chemical processes they embody are the places where life's many hungers are met. Eating, both figuratively and literally, has its roots in the soil. Gardens are the practical sites in terms of which people begin to see, smell, hear, touch, and taste the breadth and depth of human membership and responsibility. I describe a gardener's education and how it potentially leads to the development of affections and forms of attention that make possible a

spiritually deep appreciation of food. But food is not the only important garden crop. The cultivation of people with special sensitivities is an equally important harvest. I conclude this chapter by showing how human gardening at its best is inspired and shaped by an understanding of God and Christ as the prototypical gardeners who nurture and care for the world.

Chapter 4 describes the malfunction of eating as it is realized and worked out in our natural habitats, our economies, and our bodies. Using the metaphor of exile, I here describe “sinful” eating as “the anxiety of membership,” as the refusal to welcome and accept responsibility for the memberships of creation of which we are a part. To eat is to enter intimately into the lives of others. It is to participate in the growth of life but also its death. This chapter describes how eating disorders of varying kinds develop because people are unable or unwilling to accept responsibility for this costly participation that is worked out on ecological, economic, and physiological levels. Here we discuss issues like the degradation of ecosystems and agricultural lands, the injustice and destructiveness of international trade agreements and consumer economics, the ill health of today’s marketing and eating practices, and the danger of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Chapter 5 considers the very costly nature of creaturely life. For anything to eat, others must die, most often by being eaten themselves. Death is eating’s steadfast accomplice. It is not simply the end of life but life’s precondition. This chapter examines how this death is to be characterized. I argue that death is best understood not only as the cessation of an individual’s biological functioning but as the cessation of membership. I then consider how a sacrificial sensibility can be brought to bear on this topic, arguing that sacrifice is frequently misunderstood to be a violent act done to appease a bloodthirsty God. Turning to the story of Noah, I develop an account of sacrifice that instead highlights the renewal of life through self-offering and service. I further consider how the Eucharist, itself often understood as a sacrifice, can be interpreted to shed light on this particular issue. I end the chapter by showing how a sacrificial sensibility can inform our thinking about vegetarianism and the twin practices of feasting and fasting.

Chapter 6 gives an interpretation of the Christian Eucharist as the key to an understanding of the communion of life. Eucharistic eating heals sinfulness because it restores the memberships that make up every eating community. I develop the view that the Eucharist constitutes a communal way of being that participates in and images God’s own Trinitarian life. When we consume Jesus as the “bread of life” (John 6), a transformation of eating occurs, because people are here brought into his life and his way of being in

the world. The work of Christ, in other words, is not so much about the salvation of individual souls as about leading people into true, abundant, eternal, resurrection life. Sinful eating degrades and destroys life. Eucharistic eating honors and promotes life. It creates a culture of service, hospitality, and communality that is of paramount importance as we critique today's food economies and work to create a healthier food culture.

Chapter 7 argues that a deep appreciation of eating as a participation in the memberships of life and death should end in gratitude and celebration. In particular, I consider the deep spiritual and practical significance of "saying grace." In my account, I first consider why our eating culture is so permeated by ingratitude, and then develop what gratitude means and how it is best expressed. I argue that saying grace is in fact a profoundly political act because to give thanks for food presupposes that one has committed one's own life to the re-membering or healing of the memberships that have been dis-membered by today's food systems. I conclude by showing that saying grace finds its completion in our offering ourselves and the world to God.

Will there be eating in heaven, particularly if we recall that eating presupposes so much death? Chapter 8 addresses this question by first considering what we mean when we think of heaven. Far from being an escape from this world, and thus a release from membership with each other, heaven is here described as the Spirit's transformation of relationships so that they lead to the wholeness of life. To "be in heaven" is to be in a place in such a way that every relationship is animated only by the power of God's love. If food is God's love made nutritious, and if eating is one of the primary means through which this love is extended through the world, then it makes sense to think that eating (in some transformed way, perhaps) will have a role in heaven as the sharing and enjoyment of God's love. Eating matters in this life and the next because it is a realization – imperfect now but perfect then – of God's eternal communion-building life.

The Epilogue brings us back to the question of fidelity, and argues that in our present, Anthropocene moment, we most need to learn how to be "with" each other and within our places in ways that promote mutual nurture, and that contribute to a comprehensive vision of health. In a world that is being steadily mined and degraded, there is no more urgent task than to learn to come alongside each other in ways that make clear what nurture is needed and what healing is possible. As Christians understand it, this is precisely what the work of the Holy Spirit is about. It is the Holy Spirit that is God's power in the world working to beautify and perfect creaturely life. It is the Holy Spirit, in other words, that equips us to nurture the world that nurtures us.

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and good sense. The errors that remain in this book are clearly a reflection of the fact that I have not listened well enough to their good advice.

Writing this book has been a humbling experience. What began as a fairly straightforward endeavor – namely, an attempt to discover what a theological account of eating might look like – has brought me to the realization that my own eating hardly measures up to the reconciling, communion-building desire of God. I am in no position to install myself as the theological food police! I offer this book with the hope that as eaters we might together become more merciful and charitable in the eating that we do.

One of life's greatest gifts is the loving support of a home and family. I have been gifted beyond all comprehension or deserving by my wife Gretchen and my children Emily, Anna, Benjamin, and Luke. My own nurture began with my parents, Ingrid and Alex Wirzba. My mother has cooked some of my most memorable and delicious meals, and my father has been one of the most generous hosts I know. I thank them for their love and example. I dedicate this book to them.