



BOOK REVIEWS

Norman Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land*

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Human beings are called to an agrarian life. At the heart of this simple and provocative claim lies a lively and grounded spirituality. Norman Wirzba's most recent book, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land* presents an alternative agrarian vocation which, if embraced, places us in deeper and more just relationship with God, self, neighbour and the land. Lest the reader assume (and summarily reject) a premise that the agrarian life comprises an atavistic return to rural life, we must quickly clarify: agrarians are not farmers. Agrarians in all kinds of places and contexts 'work to improve the lives of people and land at the same time' (p. 57). This work includes attention to 'good food, clean water, amiable company, good work, excellent tools, fertile soil, pollinating bees, helpful neighbors, protein-producing herbivores, and strong traditions of memory that pass on essential insights and skills to following generations' (p. 57). In *Agrarian Spirit*, Wirzba turns his characteristically interdisciplinary and agrarian lens to practices, the embodied 'ways' of Christian faith. Even so, his treatment of agrarian spiritual exercises remains philosophically and theologically grounded. The first part of the book adeptly frames the task of reimagining spiritual practices and dispositions through an agrarian lens, while the second part attends to a series of six practices and dispositions.

In the first part, 'Agrarian Fundamentals', Wirzba corrects the theological error of an escapist and dualistic spirituality that despises the body, arguing that heaven is not an otherworldly 'place', but an active, transformative dwelling with the creative presence of God among God's beloved creatures. One of the problems underlying this faulty perspective, he argues, is our denigration of agrarian work (and the people and communities who historically have done it), which puts us at risk of 'losing a tactile, fully sensuous, and practiced connection with the world that makes their living possible' (p. 16). Importantly, Wirzba offers some extended reflection on the racialised history of agriculture in the United States, and the barriers and violence that black and indigenous agrarian communities have faced. Given these historical realities, paired with false dualistic theological constructions that pit body and soul against each other, the desire to escape or transcend embodied existence might be understandable. An agrarian spirituality resists this impulse, however, because '(f)or the one animated by the breath of God, the point is to participate in God's nurturing, healing, and reconciling of

embodied life here and now, and thereby to contribute to the transformation of this material world' (p. 55).

Each of the chapters in the second part, 'Agrarian Spiritual Exercises', explicates some core agrarian principles for six interrelated spiritual practices and dispositions: prayer, seeing, descent, humility, generosity and hope. Prayer is recast as attention, exemplified in the emphases in the Lord's Prayer on transforming desire, understanding life as gift and forgiving indebtedness. Approaching prayer as attention necessitates that we rightly see the world as beloved by God. As one of God's beloved creatures, the human being should understand transcendence not as an upward trajectory, but as a kind of descent into the depths of creation, seeking 'the unfathomable and mysterious divine power moving *within* creation' (p. 113). Thus rooted, we learn humility by understanding ourselves who live through the nurture and love of others. The practice of generosity is born out of this understanding of life and connectedness as a gift, inspiring gratitude and a desire to share with others. Finally, we learn hope not by fixating on an increasingly forbidding future, but by identifying the grounds for love, whereby 'the question of hope turns to the very practical matter of what your particular love requires of you' (p. 177). Turning to love cultivates more resonant relationships with each other and with places, even as this work necessarily implicates us in experiences of grief and practices of repentance.

Along the way, Wirzba introduces some interlocutors who might be new to readers (Tim Ingold's work on meshwork and correspondence, for example, or an extended excursus on farmers Don and Marie Ruzicka's hopeful journey towards reconciling with the land). These unconventional conversation partners lend themselves to unexpected 'takes' on the six agrarian practices and dispositions, while leaving out other aspects. One might wonder, for example, why, in a chapter on prayer as attention, the emphasis is on the Lord's Prayer and not contemplative practices. Wirzba does not claim to provide an exhaustive treatment, however.

If a critique is to be made of the book, it might be inherent in the challenge of addressing a diverse audience, with a wide range of histories, agential power and contributions through these agrarian practices. For example, Wirzba forthrightly names in chapter 2 the coercion, exploitation, violence and economic injustice faced by black and indigenous farmers in the United States. He writes, poignantly, about black agrarians' 'commitment to cultivating free people in resilient communities on healthy land in hostile economic conditions' (pp. 25–6), a positive example of how such communities can 'cultivate the sympathies and affections' necessary for 'long-term viable and flourishing life' (p. 27). When he gets to the final chapter on 'Learning to Hope', however, the themes are repentance, desiring forgiveness and making amends. While he makes a clear point that not all of us are equally culpable for ecological harm, it is a little surprising that practices of resistance and resilience as described in chapter 2 do not also make an appearance in the chapter on hope.

Wirzba's writing in *Agrarian Spirit* is at once genuine, theologically nuanced and inviting. Embodying the very dispositions he advocates in the book, Wirzba demonstrates in word and spirit how loving neighbour and place brings one closer to God's loving power, at work in the depths of the world.

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