
WHAT DO WE DO WHEN WE EAT?

Part II

A THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

What do we do when we eat? In the second part of this contribution the fivefold typology offered in the first part is supplemented by three (more or less) theological approaches on the basis of the concepts of recycling, kenosis and superfluous joy. In an inconclusive proposal it is suggested that eating is best understood as a form of intimacy, not enmity. Indeed, one becomes what one eats. One litmus test for any adequate theological interpretation of eating is an eschatological one: would "eternal life" involve both eating and predation, eating but not predation, or no eating and therefore no predation? What kind of life would that be? Or is our last best hope merely for life on earth to continue as long as possible, if not forever?

Key Words: Christianity; Eating; Food; Intimacy; Joy; Kenosis; Predation; Recycling

Biblical and Theological Explorations Regarding Predation

The positions plotted in the typology above are not overtly theological in orientation although religious categories can scarcely be avoided. One may therefore read the spectrum between a Darwinian struggle for survival and an ascetic attempt to minimise violence also in terms of the tension between a Manichean pessimism and a Pelagian optimism.

As almost every scholar contributing to theological discourse on food has observed, food is deeply intertwined with the core tenets of Christian identity in numerous ways. One may merely mention biblical themes such as the fruit in the Garden of Eden, the Passover meal, the provision of manna in the desert, the food regulations in the Torah, the notorious meals that Jesus enjoyed with outcasts, the declaration of Jesus that he is the “Bread of Life” (John 6:48), the celebration of the Holy Communion and the coming wedding feast of the “Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 19:9).

Nevertheless, it seems that the inevitability of predation to allow for human forms of eating is typically avoided in theological reflections. The tacit assumption is probably that human beings are entitled to eat other forms of life since they are the “crown of creation”. Christianity has at times shied away from the implications of the food chain (with its intricate balance of one thing eating another) as something created by God and declared to be good. This is probably related to the fear of blaming God for evil¹ or to valid fears that references to the role of predation may be used to legitimise class and gender domination. Nevertheless, while Theophilus of Antioch believed that predation resulted from the fall, Augustine argued that it was simply an aspect of the created order that one animal is the nourishment of another. To wish that it were otherwise would not be reasonable. Likewise,

¹ See Wilkinson (1975:21).

Thomas Aquinas criticised those who thought there had been no predation among animals before the fall.

In the biblical roots of Christianity there seems to be no such scruples though. In Psalm 104 the food chain is regarded as an expression of God's wisdom and abundant care for living creatures:

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 (Ps. 104:14-15, NRSV).

You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.

When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens (Ps. 104:20-22, NRSV).

O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things (Ps. 104:24, 27-28, NRSV).

On the basis of such passages John Bimson observes that, "Unlike many in the modern West, estranged from nature and inclined to sentimentalise it, the Hebrew poets had no problem with the natural world's being the way it is. They were fully aware of nature's redness in tooth and claw, and its apparent wastefulness, but did not find this incompatible with belief in a wise and loving Creator; they thus saw no need to invoke a 'cosmic fall' to excuse those aspects that we find offensive."² Similar sentiments are expressed in Ecclesiastes, albeit that this text reveals the anxieties of the (not so leisured) privileged class and a solidarity amongst God's mortal creatures:

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccl. 2:24-26, NRSV).

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and

² Bimson, (2006:73).

humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity (Eccl. 3:12-13, 18-19, NRSV).

So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun (Eccl. 8:15, NRSV).

This may well be sound counsel, as long as it is recognised that, in an evolutionary context, eating also implies being eaten!

The role of predation in human eating is of course often discussed with reference to the contrasting food regulations in Genesis 1 and 9. In the Genesis narrative there is a quick progression from eating fruit (Gen 2), to baking bread in toil (Gen 3), to offering grains and meat as a sacrifice (Gen 4), to drinking wine (Gen 9). This narrative is widely addressed in popular and academic debates on vegetarian and vegan diets. In the Torah there is a surprising paucity of further food regulations on what one may eat or with whom one may eat.³ One may also point to eschatological imagery in Isaiah. On the one hand, the vision of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah 11 suggests that predation will be terminated eschatologically. The hope is expressed that “The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Is 11:7, NRSV). However, living organisms still have to die to provide food for others. By contrast, the eschatological imagery of Isaiah 25 suggests a less than vegetarian meal. Verse 8 indicates that the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces and will “swallow up death forever”. However, this is preceded by the promise in verse 6: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (Is. 25:6, NRSV). Then there is the matter of the fattened calf slaughtered to celebrate the return of the ‘prodigal’ son in Jesus’ famous parable in Luke 15.

How, then, is such biblical evidence to be understood theologically and ethically? As far as I can see one may identify at least three approaches to a theology of eating in the available literature that addresses the underlying inevitability of predation within the functioning of the food chain. These approaches are necessarily related to the typology offered above and none of these are derived purely from theological considerations.

In the discussion below I will describe these approaches in terms of the concepts of recycling, kenosis and superfluous joy. In the literature these approaches are often brewed together (to use a food-related metaphor) so that the typology below indicates logical options rather than actual positions adopted. Nevertheless, and only upon further reflection, one may find a roughly Trinitarian differentiation here given the theocentric focus of such recycling, the Christological concentration associated with kenosis and the Pneumatological orientation of the joy of living. Whether there is any unity in such a trinity is open to contestation.⁴

God’s Work of Recycling

A first option is to regard acts of eating as precisely that which a benevolent God declared to be ‘good’ (if perhaps not perfect) about finite creatures. The whole world is offered by its

³ See the comparative study by Freidenreich (2011).

⁴ Méndez-Montoya (2012:3) comes close by envisioning God both as superabundance and as intra-Trinitarian self-sharing and nurturing Love. Accordingly, “creation is a cosmic banquet – and interdependent network of edible signs – that participates in God’s nurturing sharing”. On this basis he proposes an alimentary theology that does not only talk about food but becomes food (for thought) (p. 29).

maker as a divine banquet, a cosmic feast. All that is alive lives by eating. To eat is to participate in God's gift of life,⁵ even to participate in God's 'eternal' (perhaps ongoing?) life. The blessings from God imply that the materiality of the world is a doxological expression of God's gift; creation is a Eucharistic sign of thanksgiving.⁶ Predation, killing other organisms for food, absorbing other metabolisms is therefore not merely condoned or eschewed but praised as an integral part of a world that includes living creatures. In ecosystems nothing that lives is ever wasted but becomes recycled through the role of bacteria, fungi and worms. Holmes Rolston rightly insists that "Even grazers are predators of a kind, though what they eat does not suffer. Again, an Earth with only herbivores and no omnivores or carnivores would be impoverished – the animal skills demanded would be only a fraction of those that have resulted in actual zoology – no horns, no fleet-footed predators or prey, no fine-tuned eyesight and hearing, no quick neural capacity, no advanced brains. We humans stand in this tradition, as our ancestors were hunters. We really cannot envision a world, on any Earth more or less like our own, which can give birth to the myriad forms of life that have been generated here, without some things eating other things."⁷

In the same way the extinction of species (including hominid species) is regarded as not by itself problematic (except for a radical loss of biodiversity) since this allows a niche to be filled by the emergence of other species. One has to stir the stew from time to time or else it will burn! From the perspective of the flourishing of an ecosystem, the death of individual organisms, including human beings, is necessary for the functioning of the food chain. Organic material is continuously being recycled. Fertility emerges from death – as many fertility cults have assumed.⁸ Such recycling suggests the principles of co-inherence and exchange.⁹

This position requires a radically non-anthropocentric approach. Human beings form an integral part of God's creation and as such part of the food chain. We humans have to eat in order to live; we have to absorb the world into our own bodies and transform the ingredients into ourselves, into flesh, blood and bones.¹⁰ When we die we become food for others and so we are "received back into the great sea of life and love which is God."¹¹ We as human beings should accept our own finitude, our own human scale and death as the final relinquishment of individuated ego into the cosmic matrix of matter and energy. The earth is the womb out of which we arise at birth and into which we should be content to return at death.¹² Accordingly, all the component parts of matter and energy that coalesced to make up our individuated self are not lost, but are taken up in the "great matrix of being" and thus become food for new beings to emerge.¹³

One may therefore eat with gratitude but only if being eaten is accepted and, in the inevitable end, indeed welcomed and celebrated.¹⁴ Being eaten then entails the acknowledgement-

⁵ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:86), drawing on insights from Alexander Schmemann.

⁶ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:86), almost verbatim.

⁷ See Rolston (1994: 213-214).

⁸ See Wilkinson (1975:16).

⁹ See Wilkinson (1975:20).

¹⁰ This is a paraphrase of a quotation from Alexander Schmemann in Wilkinson (1975:6).

¹¹ See again McFague (2013:186).

¹² See Ruether (1975:211).

¹³ See Ruether (1983:258), almost verbatim.

¹⁴ Wirzba (2011:159) suggests that the Eucharist is not so much about consumption but about being consumed.

ment that we are nothing more than creatures, not the Creator; that our mortality is embedded in being creatures and that it requires an appropriate humility to know that we are derived from humus.

Despite the description of humans as ‘creatures’, it is not obvious how this position may be regarded as theological in orientation. Berthold Brecht’s wry comment may help somewhat: “The slogan of hell: Eat or be eaten. The slogan of heaven: Eat and be eaten.”¹⁵ One may certainly extend such an ecocentric approach towards a theocentric position but the danger here is that a position that is adopted on other (perhaps plausible) grounds is merely legitimised theologically. Moreover, the holism assumed in both ecocentric and theocentric approaches begs epistemological questions. How can one detect what is good for an ecosystem if one is always embedded within a particular ecosystem? Or more existentially: How is the one being eaten to see how this may be good for the ecosystem? How can one see the whole except by constructing a notional whole from a particular perspective and position of power? Is it not arrogant to claim to know more than one can know? How can one see things from God’s perspective? Is this not a way of ‘playing God’ and therefore of denying being a creature? Is the danger not that any claim for divine revelation may be used to legitimise self-interests? Does such a position not amount to a defence of the powerful? Does such an ecocentric approach not run the risk of environmental fascism, i.e. sacrificing individuals for the sake of the presumed well-being of the group? What about caring for the weak and vulnerable? From the perspective of Christian theology, one would need to clarify the Christology and Pneumatology that such a position assumes. This can be done, for example by suggesting that Christ rendered his body to be eaten, that the seed has to die in order to yield new life, that the Spirit sustains but also brings forth new life. However, the true test would come at the end: is eating and predation also affirmed eschatologically? Is the God of life therefore also one who is the author of pain and death?¹⁶ Would death therefore have the last word after all?

The alternative to a radically secularised and reductionist theology of recycling food would be one where all of recycled life is deified (i.e. the Orthodox notion of theosis) in such a way that creation participates/partakes in God’s very being. If God shares God’s own being through a gesture of hospitality and generosity (Christ becoming food for us), human nature, incorporated in the body of Christ, is deified. This is the approach that Angel Méndez-Montoya proposes:

In the Eucharist, divinity takes the risk of becoming food because of a desire to indwell (or abide) in the beloved, just as food becomes a part of the eater. But in this kenotic

He adds that “being eaten” by Jesus (including being chewed, swallowed and digested) is not about bodily or bacterial decomposition: “Eating Jesus and being eaten by him effects the transformation in us so that we can become the food that nurtures and celebrates the world” (2011:160). Wirzba (2011:178) also says the following: “Eating at the Eucharist table we are asking to be transformed … so that whenever we eat, those we eat and those we eat with will have been welcomed and cherished as manifestations of God’s love … Jesus shows us that the best and most appropriate response to the gifts of God, the way we become worthy of the nurture of another, is for us to turn ourselves into a source of nurture for the world.” The problem with this formulation is that the gratitude expressed is for the deaths of actual living organisms while the nurture provided seems to be primarily of a spiritual nature. If not, I should not mind a mosquito sucking my blood as this is God’s gift to nurture mosquitoes.

¹⁵ Quoted in Wilkinson (1975:1). The reference is to Brecht’s *Whole Earth Epilog*. Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1974:375.

¹⁶ As Loren Wilkinson (1975:3) observes, “Christians have been reluctant to list death amongst the goods of God’s creation.” Accordingly, to be delivered from sin is to be delivered from death. However, if there is no death, there can be no life either! What, then, is meant by eternal life?

giving there is not only a self-immersion of the supernatural in the natural. This *convenientia* of the Incarnation as well as the Eucharistic feeding allows the elevation of the human condition of the supernatural: a tendency or forward direction toward a deeper reality of intimacy with God as in the beatific vision and the final destination at the eschaton.¹⁷

On the one hand this glorifies the food that is eaten, but (depending on how deification is understood) also undermines the materiality of eating. If the materiality of food is preserved, this begs questions around who eats what so that the problem of predation returns with a vengeance – unless only human nature is deified in this way.¹⁸ This would abandon the non-anthropocentric stance adopted above and would deify/justify the sacrifice of some living beings as food for others (especially humans) at the top of the food chain.

Providing Food for Others through Kenotic Love

Another option is to challenge a legitimisation of the use of force embedded in predation through a retrieval of kenosis. Accordingly, to focus on the survival of the fittest through killing and eating entails a one-sided reading of evolutionary history. There is, after all, not only competition for food but also cooperation, found especially amongst social species but also between species. Such cooperation by definition entails reciprocal (mutual exchange of benefits, burdens and services), if not always equal relationships. This suggests that, perhaps, relatedness has an ontological priority over individuals requiring food. To establish and sustain relationships requires giving and receiving. This may be interpreted in terms of the Christological category of kenosis, i.e. self-emptying for the sake of the other, or (more appropriately) for the sake of loving relationships, based on mutual respect, mutual care and mutual trust. Whenever such relationships are distorted, this requires a spirit of forgiveness but also a willingness to make oneself vulnerable by waiting upon a reciprocal response from the other. Such self-emptying is not necessarily for the sake of the other (although that is sometimes required) but at best for the sake of a flourishing relationship – of which the one making the sacrifice forms part. Food is thus God's gift of love for the sake of love.¹⁹

There is an almost over-whelming emphasis on kenosis in the work of a wide range of contemporary theologians.²⁰ Some suggest that kenosis is not merely a contingent act in

¹⁷ Méndez-Montoya (2012:144).

¹⁸ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:103), drawing on Sergei Bulgakov. In my view this interplay between kenosis (see below) and theosis in the end fails to do justice to the interplay between God's work of creation and redemption. The strategy here is a typically Catholic one: grace elevates nature. This leads to a Eucharistic theology where the material is conflated with the spiritual, the physicality of bread and wine is thus spiritualised. This may be contrasted with the reformed notion of grace restoring nature. Bread and wine retains its both its material and symbolic connotations. What is material is not divinised; the integrity of creation is affirmed in all its finitude. If so, the eschatological problem is not avoided but radicalised. Admittedly, Méndez-Montoya (2012:148) seeks to reaffirm the materiality of bread and wine so that the created order is not surpassed or cancelled in receiving and sharing the divine gift. He affirms an "in-betweenness of what is immanent and transcendent, human and divine, material and spiritual, nature and grace, the visible *in* the invisible" (2012:149). I am not convinced that his intention is fulfilled, that this is not a matter of proverbially having your cake (bread) *and* eating it.

¹⁹ Wirzba (2011:11) adds that, "To receive food as a gift and as a declaration of God's love and joy is to receive food in a theological manner." It seems possible to sustain such a position only on the basis of anthropocentric assumptions: food is God's gift to humans! Unless one also accepts being given as food for worms?!

²⁰ The volume edited by Polkinghorne (2001) set the tone for others to follow. One may also mention contributions by Denis Edwards, George Ellis, John Haught, Sallie McFague, Christopher Southgate and many others.

history to correct what is wrong, to restore broken relationships, best illustrated by the cross of Jesus Christ, but indeed an underlying cosmic principle. Accordingly, one may detect such a self-sacrificial pattern in the ‘birth’ and ‘death’ of stars, the formation of planets made from the ‘ashes’ of ‘dead’ stars, the emergence and evolution of life and in human history alike. One may even suggest that kenosis offers a description of “the moral nature of the universe”.²¹ Eating is indeed only possible through the death of other living organisms. Sacrificial death is necessary for new life. If eating continues there is no sacrifice to end all sacrifices, even if the slaughtering of animals is discontinued.²² One may even argue that every act of eating is Eucharistic: Whenever we eat anything, we eat the body of Christ.²³ Whatever we kill to eat, belongs to God and is taken from God. Amongst humans who are able to discern this kenotic pattern, the death of others should be accepted with gratitude by the one who is eating and not in a triumphalist spirit of victory over the weak and vulnerable.²⁴ The Eucharist is a concentration of a life of gratitude for a gift that nourishes.²⁵ One may therefore need to say: “Worthy are all lambs, all victims of the world’s carniverosity, for out of their death comes life.”²⁶ This spirit of eating therefore need not avoid the problem of predation and the recognition that the death of other forms of life is required in order to live. This is poignantly expressed by Wendell Berry:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly,

²¹ See Ellis & Murphy (1996).

²² See Grumett & Muers (2010:121). The suggestion is that Christ died the place of other animals – so that they need not be killed in human rituals of reconciliation or as food for humans. This may end human consumption of meat but of course does not abolish eating so that the underlying problem remains.

²³ See Berry (2010:142), drawing on the poetry of William Carlos Williams. See also the discussion in Wilkinson (1975:16f), drawing on C.S. Lewis’ exposition of the similarities and differences between the mythic “corn king” and Christ, the dying God who offers bread to his followers, saying “This is my body.” Although the God of the Bible is the God of nature, this is no nature God, but the creator of nature. This begs a crucial question: Is the pattern of death and re-birth found in nature because it is first found in God? This is Lewis’ position, appreciated by Wilkinson, and followed by many others calling for “deep incarnation” (see Gregersen 2015). As suggested above the answer to this question depends on whether the incarnation is regarded as something ontological (an underlying cosmic principle) or as a contingent response in history to human sin. This classic debate between the Thomists and Scotists remains unresolved.

²⁴ This is how Wirzba (2011:192) puts it: “To be genuinely thankful presupposes that we have made some effort to appreciate and know what we are thankful for … At root, when we offer thanks for fellow creatures we acknowledge that without them we could not be, let alone thrive. We confess that our health and happiness are entirely dependent upon their well-being and integrity, and that we have not always served them well. … Grateful people understand that they cannot be thankful for others if they are at the same time knowingly engaged in their destruction. The thankful, hospitable word that carries the world within it – ‘Thank you God for these tortillas and this salsa, these friends and this guest!’ – also cares for what it carries.” By saying grace we carry God’s sustaining love for the world within human speech (2011:202). One is alas left to wonder whether gratitude implies killing caringly in order to eat instead of being eaten. Wirzba (2011:197) suggests that one needs to become worthy of the life and death that one’s eating requires, as one must eat. Elsewhere Wirzba (2011:120-121) puts it this way: “No matter how resourceful we are, we are not the sources of our own or any other life. How should we receive and become worthy of the countless lives that are given as a means for our sustenance and good? When we ponder this question we discover an overwhelming disproportion between the extent and cost of gifts received and the human ability to adequately express gratitude for them. We sense a fundamental inability to comprehend our own experience as maintained and continually intersected by the living and dying of countless others.” This calls for gratitude in eating since we are “beneficiaries of an incomprehensible and costly generosity and hospitality (2011:121), but no mention is made of being eaten so that this suggests that other forms of life are there as food for human beings while the inverse is not considered.

²⁵ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:110).

²⁶ This is the conclusion that Loren Wilkinson (1975:15) arrives at with reference to Rev. 4:12.

greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such a desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.²⁷

From a Trinitarian perspective this approach is surely more attractive than an abstract theocentric approach that celebrates the recycling of food in ecosystems. The Christian faith embraces a God who dies so that new life may be possible.²⁸ However, in my view kenosis is best understood as a contingent response to human sin in history rather than as an eternal cosmic principle. It is thus an initiative aimed at restoring relationships, correcting what has gone wrong. There is an added danger that the Son is called upon to patch up the Father's botched job – one in which pain, dying and death form an integral part of life and where the emergence of human sin is more or less inevitable, if not strictly speaking necessary. Indeed, human sin may then be understood as an extrapolation of the brutality embedded in nature, albeit that such brutality (killing for food) is balanced by self-sacrifice (being eaten). The role of the Spirit in such a Trinitarian exposition of kenosis is not immediately clear unless the work of the Spirit is, so to say, spiritualised, namely to encourage a recognition of the kenotic principle at work in the history of the cosmos. If kenosis is inscribed in God's work of creation, one may expect it to be maintained eschatologically. This is no sacrifice to end all sacrifices but something like an eternal recurrence of a sacrificial spirit. Nietzsche would surely have something to say about that, while the feminist critique of the need "to bear one's cross" is well-known and certainly relevant here. Is sacrifice not what is typically expected if not demanded from the victims of history? It may be dramatic to announce that it is the Messiah, the Christ, the Logos who is sacrificed for the sake of others, but there are grave (!) dangers in any construction where the one is sacrificed 'for' the other.

The emphasis on kenosis may, however, also be coupled with a process of moral development to which it is more or less inversely proportioned. Accordingly, self-sacrifice is not an aim in itself but directed towards and precisely enables the emergence of reciprocal relationships based on mutual respect and mutual trust. Such relationships may not have characterised earlier phases of evolutionary history but with the emergence of humans and human civilisation there is the possibility of a humane society that is epitomised by the humane treatment of non-human animals. A vegetarian and vegan diet thus represents a higher phase of cultural evolution. Such a kenotic approach may well be found amongst the followers of Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead. The attractiveness of the process of moral development is undermined by an inability to come to terms with predation amongst non-human animals and the re-imposition of a sharp divide between biological and cultural evolution.²⁹ Would African and Islamic cultures, with their affirmation of meat as something festive (for example as compared to Jainism – that often relies on Dalit labour), then have to be regarded as a lower form of civilisation? Does this not amount to a premature inauguration through human effort of an eschatological dispensation that will abolish not only eating meat but eating anything?³⁰

²⁷ Quoted in Southgate (2010:258). The reference is to Wendell Berry's *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural*. San Francisco: North Point, 1981:281.

²⁸ See McFague (2013:159).

²⁹ This position is not readily found in the available literature. For a hint in this direction, see Muers (2010:187). Drawing on Brian Luke's work, she suggests that animal liberation can be seen as a process of human development and an extension of our capacities as moral agents.

³⁰ See Grumett & Muers (2010:137).

Eating as Superfluous Joy

A final option is to focus on the sheer joy of eating – at least for the one who is eating. This approach is similar to the one that describes the recycling of organic material in the food chain but offers a different interpretation, namely in terms of over-abundance of life, of food, of joy. Such joy cannot be reduced to hedonistic experiences of pleasure or consumerist over-indulgence since the abundance is precisely not taken for granted. Desire is not situated in lacking but as “an immersion in plenitude and sharing”.³¹ Here there is no Gnostic disdain for blood, guts, saliva, orgasm or excretion. There is a recognition of the need to make sacrifices but this is for the sake of the feast.³² The superfluous goodness of life is not primarily associated with the life of the mind but with being embodied. The incarnation of Christ suggests that being embodied belongs to God’s very being. Flesh is the thing that God loves.³³ The pulse invigorating Robert Farrar Capon’s writings on eating is that food is simply delicious and should not be reduced to what is useful or nutritious. He regards the preference for meaning over matter to be idolatrous.³⁴

The goodness of life is celebrated not as a sombre self-sacrificial gift that has to be received with an all too serious sense of gratitude but as something exuberant, pulsating, joyful, marvellous, even ecstatic. Versfeld speaks of the “incredible largesse emptied upon the earth, which is itself superfluous”.³⁵ Augustine was wrong in making a distinction between using things and reserving joy only for God.³⁶ It is through enjoying food that we glorify the Creator. To taste food is to taste God.³⁷ Yes, life is short but it ought to be lived to the fullest, with room for the festive occasion.³⁸ The festive is the godly.³⁹ Life is nasty and brutish too, but (at least for humans) that has more to do with the distortion wrought by sin than with the gift of life itself. Eating is therefore embedded in the joy of life. Through

³¹ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:154).

³² This is symbolized by the sacrifice made by the main character in *Babette’s Feast* when she used the 10 000 francs won in a lottery to cook one sumptuous banquet for a sect who opts to eat but refuses (in vain!) to have pleasure in eating. They had to learn that God’s grace is lavishly spread over all of creation (see Cavanaugh 2011).

³³ Wirzba (2011:218), verbatim.

³⁴ Capon (1967:117).

³⁵ Versfeld (1983:150).

³⁶ Arnold van Ruler (2009:121-122) express this criticism of Augustine poignantly: “Has the Christian tradition not erred on this point throughout the centuries? Gross modo it always maintained: one may enjoy (*frui*) only God and things eternal and that has to be done internally; the external world may only be used (*uti*). In my view there is something blasphemous here: in this way one insults the Creator by regarding creation to be something inferior. Moreover, one distorts the pure relationship between humanity and God in all its fullness: how can one ‘have’ (and thus enjoy) God without God’s world? One may almost add that this touches upon God’s essence because (at least for us) God is never without God’s world” (my translation). Accordingly, one best praises God by enjoying God’s world.

³⁷ Versfeld (1983:33) puts this unashamedly: “The good life, then, is … where the water or wine we drink … has not lost its corporeality because it is the eternal drink which will take away all thirst. Hence we talk of *tasting* life, of *tasting* God, the gustation of God, when our flesh and blood call for the Living God – our flesh and blood, not a meagre spiritual ego born of desire and abstraction and attempting to nourish itself on the thin soup of success.”

³⁸ Versfeld (1983:35) warns, though, that it is gluttonous to want a feast every day; “we can never be festive if we wish every day to be a feast.” And: “A festivity does not necessitate all sorts of gorgeous food. … It is far more essential for the heart to overflow than the dishes” (1983:39).

³⁹ Versfeld observes that the festive expresses some largesse; it calls for a certain superfluity, for a cup running over. There is more than what is needed. He adds that “One might say that creation is a sheer boiling or bubbling over of the high spirits of God, as gratuitous as love always is” (Versfeld 1983:35).

eating we taste the goodness of God.⁴⁰ Food is God's love made delectable.⁴¹ One may add that this sense of superfluous joy is best expressed in the union of the holy communion. The bread and wine suggest a "succulent semiotics of excess"⁴² As Méndez-Montoya suggests:

If touching is also being touched ... then in the Eucharist the partaker is also in some way being touched by God. Thus, above all, in the Eucharist it is the sense of taste (in lips, mouth and tongue) that moves toward the most intimate ecstatic union with God. What could be more intimate than 'ingesting' God?⁴³

This emphasis on the sheer, pulsating joy of eating and drinking, of life in all its vulnerability, is exemplified in the writings of Robert Farrar Capon. Amongst many quotable passage the following toast may suffice:

We are free: nothing is needful, everything is for joy. Let the bookkeepers struggle with their balance sheets; it is the tippler who sees the untipped Hand. God is eccentric; He has loves, not reasons. *Salute!*⁴⁴

Indeed, humans are not only preying animals but also praying animals and indeed playing animals.⁴⁵ How is the relatedness of these three dimensions of human existence to be understood? Is playing a function of preying? Or is playing a function of praying? Or is life better understood as play than as a grim struggle for survival? It should at least be clear that eating is situated within this interplay. A definitive answer to this question would remain elusive and will probably undermine the play. In an eloquent passage, worth quoting quite extensively, Marthinus Versfeld celebrates the superfluous nature of life and the joys of eating. He says:

The fallacy in popular Darwinism is that it is too broadly based on the notion of utility. This or that variation is *useful*. The splendour of the orchid, the quinine of the bark, are useful for survival. Hence the notion of nature red in tooth and claw. Each bit of life is one ego trying to get in ahead of the others. Capitalist nature! The result is a nature short of all superfluity and largesse which turns into egoism the glory of humility with which the thing, the substance, celebrates its own being. What is fundamental in reality is not self-preservation but generosity. ...

Our devastation of nature is a consequence of our not seeing this. We see it as a welter of struggles for domination, by imputing to nature our own lust for dominion. We create a chaos of egos, and see in nature the mirror of our own society, a cannibalism of egos. The basis of nature conservation is a vision of nature as superfluous, and therefore generous because created in eternal generosity. ... The secret of nature and of the evolutionary process is humility, therefore we should see nature as play, as a great game rather than a grim struggle. If nature is, as St. Augustine said, an order of love, we can expect anything to happen because love is creatively spontaneous. It is this spontaneity that is bodied forth in the evolutionary process. The *raison d'être* of our convivium is not work but play. Natural selection presupposes the rich efflorescence of superfluity, so

⁴⁰ See Jung (2004:43), also Ayres (2013:54).

⁴¹ As Wirzba (2015:124) maintains.

⁴² See Méndez-Montoya (2012:74).

⁴³ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:69).

⁴⁴ Capon (1970:83-84).

⁴⁵ See Versfeld (1983:153).

perhaps we should call it natural appreciation. Nature looks more like a dance than like a board meeting.⁴⁶

Versfeld then spells out the implications for eating:

Evolution is what we eat, and if you go wrong about evolution you go wrong about cooking and you miss the glorious coincidences, cooperation and marriages marking the course of nature Bacon and eggs – what a marriage! Pumpkins, potatoes, beans, carrots, parsnips, finochio, celeriac, chicory, tomatoes and eggplant – what a dance! They are differentiated, each is itself, because they have danced out of God, each in his own clothes, to make their contribution to the convivium, where marvellous meetings take place ...⁴⁷

Therefore a recipe, which is a way in which you deal with the Ten Thousand Things, is also a lifestyle. If you can get your ingredients to be and know and love themselves, they will ascend as a sweet savour from the altar which is your dining table. A recipe is a lifestyle and you can cook yourself into heaven or hell. A good cook creates pied beauty. Don't eat his dish because it is necessary, or full of vitamins, or not fattening, but because it is gorgeous. Then your eating can be in praise of God and of the togetherness of a company in the convivium. If your cooking is play and not work, it will smell of Paradise. The resurrection starts in the cooking pot, because man is what he eats and because what he is, his substantial existence, is in its uniqueness touched by eternity. He is so utterly superfluous and dispensable that he is lovable and will never be dispensed with. The water and wine and bread of life go into the privy, yet go with us beyond history. Nothing hits heaven which does not hit earth.⁴⁸

Versfeld's eloquent formulations remain anthropocentric. The ingredients bubbling in the pot are humanised through human cooking. His formulations are not always gender sensitive but his position does not assume class privilege since he insists that feasting is not the prerogative of the affluent only. In fact, beggars may be better able to express such joy over a humble meal. One may well extend Versfeld's analysis to include non-human forms of feasting on abundant food.

From a theological perspective one may argue that joy is even deeper and greater than faith, hope and love.⁴⁹ Our existence has no substance other than creative joy.⁵⁰ The joy of the Creator is best understood as the exuberant joy of children at play, not the adult desperation of needing to win a game of soccer or the hedonistic joys of (over-)consumption. Accordingly, Jesus is the Bread of Life who came to convert those who kill the joy of others, to allow life to flourish in all its fullness (John 10:10). The animating Spirit is the one who breathes energy into living bodies, who renews life, who makes food available to nourish life, who brings forth new life even from death and amidst death. To participate in the Spirit is to participate in the flow of life, eating, drinking, defecating, ejaculating. Yes, this flow of life also implies being eaten but that seems to be the price that has to be paid for the joy of life, the love that is required to sustain the joy.⁵¹.

⁴⁶ Versfeld (1983:11).

⁴⁷ Versfeld (1983:154).

⁴⁸ Versfeld (1983:154-155).

⁴⁹ This position is derived from Arnold van Ruler's oeuvre. He would repeatedly say that joy is even higher than love. See, for example, his essay "Joy as Fundamental Christian Attitude to Life" (in Van Ruler 2009:439-443), also Van Keulen (2009).

⁵⁰ Versfeld (1983:38), verbatim.

⁵¹ Capon (1970:180) puts this Christologically: "Love is the widest, choicest door into the Passion. God saved the world not by sitting up in heaven and issuing antiseptic directives, by becoming man, and vulnerable in

To put this proverbially: The game has to come to an end but this does take anything away of the pleasure of playing the game. The goal of playing the game does not lie in the end; it is not restricted to winning it but to enhance the game and to be ennobled by it. Likewise, the goal of a journey does not lie merely in the destination (coming home) but may be found in the daily travelling, resting and eating during the journey itself. Eating cannot be reduced to refuelling. Robert Farrar Capon seeks to balance an enjoyment of the goodness of creation with an eschatological longing:

Why do we marry, why take friends and lovers, why give ourselves to music, painting, chemistry, or cooking? Out of the simple delight in the resident goodness of creation, of course; but out of more than that, too. Half of the earth's gorgeousness lies hidden in the glimpsed city it longs to become. For all its rooted loveliness, the world has no continuing city here; it is an outlandish place, a foreign home ... We were given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it great.⁵²

Capon adds:

It will be precisely because we loved Jerusalem enough to bear it in our bones that its textures will ascend when we rise; it will be because our eyes have relished the earth that the color of its countries will compel our hearts forever. The bread and the pastry, the cheeses, the wine, and the songs go into the Supper of the Lamb because we do: It is our love that brings the City home.⁵³

This does beg eschatological questions anew. What about the resurrection of the flesh? Would there be eating in heaven?⁵⁴ Would such eating not inscribe death and dying eternally? Or will death be done away with – and therefore eating as well? Alternatively, if death is not something evil in this world, why would it need to be overcome?⁵⁵ What on earth could then be meant by ‘eternal life’? Will predation need to be overcome eschatologically?⁵⁶ If so, how could that be imagined? If not, does this imply that death will have the last word?

Such an understanding of eating in the context of superfluous relationality is all too often interpreted in an anthropocentric way, namely that other living organisms are available as food for humans, being at the ‘top’ of the food pyramid. It is possible to

Jesus. He died, not because He despised the earth, but because He loved it as a man loves it – out of all proportion and sense.”

⁵² Capon (1970:179).

⁵³ Capon (1970:181).

⁵⁴ See the brave attempt to tackle such questions by Wirzba (2011:211-241). He discusses the positions of Irenaeus (affirming heavenly eating) and Tertullian (who believed that heavenly bodies will have no need to eat because God has become all the nourishment they need or could ever want through the Word of God). He speculates that such eating will not necessarily imply consuming, deforming and destroying other forms of life – in the same way that the presence of God in the burning bush did not “consume” the bush (Ex. 3:2). He argues that eating is not so much about nourishment but about hospitality and intimacy (2011:232). So Wirzba concludes: “Eating is about accepting the reality of another – its life and death, its history of struggle and success, its dignity and grace – into our lives, into our mouths, into our bodies, and into our stories and hopes” (2011: 233). To enjoy a proleptic foretaste of heaven is to participate in a Eucharistic community where people live lives based on sacrificial self-offering, grateful reception and reconciled relationships (2011:234). Despite Wirzba’s own intentions he is danger here of undermining the materiality of eating.

⁵⁵ See Wilkinson (1975:19).

⁵⁶ Southgate (2010:258) argues for the protological validation of predation as part of the evolutionary process but suggests that predation will be eschatologically healed in the transition from the old to a new creation. New creation is therefore not a restoration of the old but something radically new.

ameliorate a defence of the right to eat other beings by an ethical emphasis on gratitude (e.g. with reference to 1 Tim. 4:3-4),⁵⁷ inclusive community, reconciliation, fellowship, companionship, hospitality and an ethics of sharing and caring.⁵⁸ There is lots of room for wonder and love around a table. As Loren Wilkinson observes, “It has not been given humanity the choice to eat without killing, nor has that choice been given to any living thing. But man can eat with wonder and love, recognising his place in the household of life.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this still amounts to an anthropocentric legitimization of hierarchy. If not, then the one who eats with joy cannot wish to avoid being eaten. The underlying problem of predation still has to be addressed.⁶⁰

Such anthropocentrism is in my view the underlying flaw in the otherwise exemplary position adopted by Méndez-Montoya. He recognises that being is best understood as relational and that relationships are nourished by God’s superabundance expressed as the gift to be: “Being is not self-grounded, but is the generous sharing of God’s perpetual ‘to be’. Being, like God, is relational.”⁶¹ And: “Being is an ‘unfinished’ project or process; it is

⁵⁷ Norman Wirzba’s (2011:158) position is again exemplary: “As a food stuff the other is physically absorbed into my body. But received as a gift of God, as a member of creation benefited by God’s attention, care and blessing, the other also continues to live in me as a remembered presence. As re-membered I must henceforth attempt to eat in ways that better honor and protect the sanctity of its life … when people eat as those trained at the Eucharistic table, no life is simply fuel to be absorbed. All life becomes a sign and sacrament of God’s love, a witness to the costliness and mystery of life and death, and so becomes the inspiration to greater attention and care.” He adds: “The opening through which another is welcomed into my mouth and life is also the opening through which my life is moved to respect and respond to what is other than me – starting with the humble word of thanks, but then extending to the implementation of food economies that care for life” (2011:158). This should lead to the virtues of gratitude and hospitality, but since the meaning of food as nourishment returns here, one has to ask whether such eating does not still involve killing the other, even if this is qualified by grateful remembrance.

⁵⁸ Ayres (2013) identifies four moral commitments derived from a Eucharistic theology: 1) the priority of the hungry; 2) justice for those that work the land; 3) tending the earth; and 4) inclusion amidst alienation. See also the eloquent comment of Méndez-Montoya (2012:74): “the Eucharist is not a merely aesthetic realization and performance. At its core, it is a radical ethical expression of the for-you of a God who is not indifferent to the other, a God whose caring gesture of self-giving nourishes. God becomes the cook, the host and food itself in this eucharistic banquet. Just as God feed humanity, the partakers are called to feed their neighbor, and are challenged to transform a world of hunger, exclusion, and violence.” This vision remains rather anthropocentric though, does not situate human eating in an evolutionary context and does not factor in the costs of predation. The world as nourishment is God’s gift to humanity – who is alone able to recognize it as gift and to offer priestly thanksgiving to God (see p. 87). Sin is then the failure to recognise this gift and to regard food as possessing its own significance, outside of this gift from God (p. 88).

⁵⁹ Wilkinson (1975:23).

⁶⁰ Versfeld recognises what is at stake here by offering an extensive discussion of the contrast between cannibalism and vegetarianism. He acknowledges the attractiveness of a vegetarian position, namely its compassion for suffering that extends to all living beings, forbidding us to kill (sentient animals). If this is not affirmed consistently, one may end up on a slippery slope towards cannibalism, even considering a “modest proposal for eating children”. Accordingly, if we eat beasts we become beasts and bestial (1983:77). Versfeld counters this position by insisting on a distinction between humans and other animals: “once we treat animals as human, we shall in due course treat humans as animals” (1983:78). He adds that “The nemesis of treating animals as human is that we shall connect the eating of animal flesh with the taboo on cannibalism and become neurotic vegetarians” (1983:78). The underlying question is this: If no clear distinction is made between humans and other sentient animals, why is a distinction maintained between sentient beings and vegetables? What is the difference between “murdering a cabbage and crushing an ant? What about carnivorous plants? The vegetarian too “sits down to a platter of corpses” (1983:80). Versfeld comments: “If the lion is to lie down with the lamb, let the vegetarian lie down with the cabbage” (1983:80). If vegetarianism becomes a religion, then one may need to reprimand a God who has not arrived at vegetarianism yet, who could command Peter to “rise, kill and eat” (Versfeld 1983:77).

⁶¹ Méndez-Montoya (2012:110).

a continuous process of ‘coming to be’, since it is perpetually open to the infinite mystery and superabundance that is God’s self-sharing. The ‘isness’ of being is always in excess of its own existentiality, for it is perpetually open to God’s infinity.”⁶² Indeed, “Creation is God’s ecstatic self-exceeding: it is an expression of God’s superabundance and sharing.”⁶³ All that participates in God’s superabundant nurturing Love.⁶⁴ Food is the material form of God’s self-sharing.⁶⁵ In his proposal for an alimentary theology he attempts to overcome a notion of eating governed by the fall of humanity, i.e. one where food point toward an underlying lack (the recurrent state of being hungry), death (the finite nature of both the eater and the eaten) and destruction (the necessity to destroy other forms of life in order to survive).⁶⁶ Instead, he argues:

An alternative Catholic reading of eating affirms that, through eating in the Eucharist, unity with God is restored, and a promise of resurrected life is opened up. From this eucharistic perspective eating is not a condition of lack, but a foretaste of divine plenitude: a physical and spiritual tasting that kindles a desire for more, for that beautiful excess wherein there is yet more to savour. In the eucharistic feast, death is therefore not the end of the eater, but a promise of reintegration into the resurrected life of Christ – the Father’s offering of resurrection to the Son’s death, which is then shared in and through the Holy Spirit with the partakers of the eucharistic Paschal banquet.⁶⁷

This position seems to do justice to the materiality of eating but such eating still comes at the cost of what is eaten. God nourishes, yes, but through the deaths of other lives. The thought of being eaten is not entertained, except in terms of Christ’s Eucharistic self-sacrifice. Eucharistic eating is not an erasure of sin or a return to Eden, but “a recognition or awareness that God loves and generously shares divinity in spite of and in the midst of sin (the refusal of God’s gift). Yet such a divine generous sharing is ... transformative: from sin to redemption and deification, from scarcity to superabundance, from individualism to communion.”⁶⁸ Despite the emphasis on Eucharistic thanksgiving it is difficult to avoid the impression that being nourished is situated here in the context of a hierarchy of species, if not of class. It is the only (elect) humans who are divinised so that what is eaten has to sustain and nourish others.

Eating and the Ecstasy of Intimacy: A Provisional, Modest Proposal

The positions sketched above all remain unsatisfactory in one way or another in terms of considerations that include the scientific (traction with evolutionary history), the ecological (the rootedness of human eating in ecosystems, disallowing sharp divides between humans and other primates, between sentient animals and other forms of life, or between what is organic and what is inorganic), the cultural (avoiding reductionist accounts of human eating merely in terms of a struggle for survival), the ethical (attending to anthropocentrism, speciesism, elitism, classism, sexism, racism amidst food insecurity) and the theological (doing justice to the soteriological focus and Trinitarian width of the Christian faith).

One may nevertheless be able to detect elements of wisdom in each of the types

⁶² See Méndez-Montoya (2012:110).

⁶³ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:111).

⁶⁴ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:113).

⁶⁵ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:112).

⁶⁶ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:108).

⁶⁷ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:109).

⁶⁸ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:114).

sketched above. Only one approach would not suffice. Typically, we are inclined to give a diverging range of answers to the question why we are eating. This is indeed the attractiveness of a Trinitarian rather than an abstract theocentric approach. However, it is not clear whether there is unity within such a trinity. The types sketched above are clearly in conflict with each other so that an eclectic approach will not do either – even though we may have to rely on such eclecticism to cope in everyday decisions. The danger of eclectic approaches is that the particularity of a context may provide an easy way out to legitimise eating practices.

Of course the most serious problems related to the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food result from structural violence, what Christians would refer to in terms of sin as power (or ‘original sin’). This prompts soteriological and ethical discourse on food, especially in the context of starvation, hunger, stunting, obesity, food insecurity and an unsustainable food economy. In the (South) African context this focus is entirely appropriate and arguably far more urgent than the philosophical questions around the act of eating raised here. However, as I have suggested above, such ethical debates cannot avoid assumptions about eating and especially on the necessity of predation. These assumptions (a tendency towards any one of the options discussed above) will influence (if not determine) and distort the ethical positions derived at.

Where, then, can one find a reliable clue that can guide eating practices, also and especially in the context of food insecurity? It should be clear that food insecurity tends to aggravate the debate since each of the types gain a distinct set of connotations when situated either in a context of relative abundance or of deprivation. For example: if food is a matter of fuel for survival, then the hungry may be deemed to be evolutionary failures. If food is a matter of hedonistic pleasure, then the hungry are constantly reminded that they are denied what the elite may treasure. In the case of conspicuous consumption the hungry are conspicuously absent. By contrast, if an ascetic ideal is pushed, the poor may well wonder how this applies to them. Similar comments may be made about all the other types discussed above.

How, then, may one proceed if a mere eclecticism would not suffice? Allow me here to repeat and expand upon the equally provisional conclusion in my earlier essay entitled “Eat and/or be Eaten: The Evolutionary Roots of Violence?”

Eating is not a form of enmity but of intimacy. When we eat, Méndez-Montoya observes, “we are literally ‘intimate’ with food by physically bringing it near to the body, lips and mouth... Our bodies are literally food transformed into flesh, tendon, blood, and bone”.⁶⁹ Our mouths have multiple and competing functions – chewing, tasting, speaking, kissing – but they remain integrally related to each other.⁷⁰ By eating we consume the world around us and are nourished by it but also express a sense of communion with the world that eliminate rigid boundaries between interiority and exteriority.⁷¹ Eating may also

⁶⁹ Méndez-Montoya (2012:1). In a discussion of Laura Esquivel’s novel *Like Water for Chocolate* Méndez-Montoya explains that food may become a system of edible signs and a language of intimacy (between the characters Titia and Pedro) so that eating becomes “an act whereby the self loses its center and moves towards the other, only to return to the self, now transfigured, by this ecstatic encounter. Here eating becomes a means for the ‘indwelling’ of the self within the other. Nevertheless, in this ecstatic act, the ‘I’ preserves some sort of self-testimony, for the ‘I’ delights in this sensuous exchange. The paradox here is that self-delight requires one to move beyond the self, to experience a sense of self-loss. It is an exodus from the self that leads toward knowledge of the other, as well as to a new, transfigured self-knowledge” (2012:51).

⁷⁰ See Kass (1994:3).

⁷¹ See Méndez-Montoya (2012:94), drawing on insights from Sergei Bulgakov. He quotes Bulgakov’s notion of nourishment extensively: a metabolic exchange between a living organism and its environment that includes

become a form or erotic intimacy, namely as the desire to satisfy the appetite for the other.⁷² This suggests the need to undermine binary oppositions regarding eating – as if the absorption of food can be classified in terms of enmity and intimacy, what is inside and what is outside. When animals eat, they transfer energy derived from bacteria into another organism but in the process also feed numerous organisms living inside them. They themselves form part of larger ecosystems that are more fluid and interdependent than is often assumed. Our human bodies have porous boundaries as eating and the excretion of body fluids indicate. This is illustrated precisely by intimacy – as is the case of mothers nursing babies, between lovers and in sport. It is therefore facetious to make clear distinctions between subjects and their bodies, between materials and meaning. The food that we eat not only shapes our bodies, our moods and our self-image but also our physiology and in the long run the evolution of our species. We do become what we eat. From the perspective of ecosystems (or in terms of the Gaia hypothesis), it is not possible to identify discrete, individual organisms since the life of any one organism is intertwined with that of others. In the language of deep ecology, the Self is not restricted to an individual self but to the emergence of Life itself. In the human species the evolving universe has come to self-consciousness.

Eating does entail killing (absorbing other living organisms so that they no longer exist as discrete metabolisms), but that takes place in the interest of allowing life to flourish. Eater and eaten, the lion and the lamb form an intricate unity.⁷³ The presence of the predator is in the interest of the prey. Distinct metabolisms do exist but only within the context of larger ecosystems where absorbing another or becoming integrated in another is not a sign of death but of the flourishing of life within ecosystems.

Sallie McFague refers to the example of a nurse logs, i.e. lying down trees that have lived standing up for hundreds of years and now provide a nutrient-rich environment for young saplings to grow. The nurse log can live another several hundred years as the giver of new life. She concludes: “It all works by symbiosis – living off one another. Nothing in an old-growth forest can go it alone; nothing could survive by itself; everything in the forest is interrelated and interdependent: all flora and fauna eat from, live from the others.”⁷⁴ From this perspective, eating does not so much imply the killing of individual organisms but a transfer of energy through absorption and excretion to support the flourishing of the whole ecosystem. McFague thus suggests:

What we love is not individual eternal life for ourselves so much as the continuation of the entire awesome, beautiful abundance of creatures, great and small, that causes us to gasp in wonder and thanksgiving that we have, at least for a short time, been a part of this glorious creation. We wish it to continue, not only in our nearest and dearest (our children, our tribe,

food but also inhaling oxygen and absorbing sunlight. We are nourished through our mouths and digestive organs but also with our lungs and skin and indeed with all our senses: seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling and muscular sensation. For Bulgakov, “Life is in this sense the capacity to consume the world, whereas death is an exodus out of this world; the loss of the capacity to communicate with it; finally resurrection is a return into the world with a restoration of this capacity, though to an infinitely expanded degree” (p. 94). This insightful blurring of the boundaries between interiority and exteriority still underplays the reality of being consumed by other creatures – so that resurrection suggests a final victory of some metabolisms over others (akin to election and reprobation?).

⁷² See Méndez-Montoya (2012:65).

⁷³ So Wilkinson (1975:15).

⁷⁴ McFague (2013:21).

our country and our species) but also in all the forms, from slugs to stars, that lie outside our daily appreciation but are necessary to the health of the whole.⁷⁵

Human eating can then be endorsed as something exuberant as long as one does not shy away from being eaten, if not soon yet, then certainly later.⁷⁶ If one wishes to eat with joy, one has to accept that one cannot only be a predator but will also become prey.⁷⁷ Being eaten happens throughout one's life but this applies of course especially to being eaten in the end (even if cremated). The worms that consume our bodies are having a feast too. This convivium (Versfeld) is, in its own uniqueness, touched by eternity too. This is the meaning of compost, the humus from which humans emerge. This is where the resurrection of life starts, not only in the cooking pot but also in the grave. As Walt Whitman puts it: "Behold this compost. Behold it well! ... The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out

⁷⁵ McFague (2013:165-166).

⁷⁶ See the remarkable essay by Val Plumwood (2011) following an incident in 1985 in which she almost became food for a crocodile. Her reflections are worth quoting at considerable length (if only because of the relative obscurity of the journal where this was published) since she does not shy away from the problem of predation, resists an androcentric master/monster narrative, questions superficial Christian answers and places the human act of eating squarely within the food chain in which we are situated:

"In Western thinking, in contrast, the human is set apart from nature as radically other. Religions like Christianity must then seek narrative continuity for the individual in the idea of an authentic self' that belongs to an imperishable realm above the lower sphere of nature and animal life. The eternal soul is the real, enduring, and identifying part of the human self, while the body is animal and corrupting. But transcending death this way exacts a great price; it treats the earth as a lower, fallen realm, true human identity as outside nature, and it provides narrative continuity for the individual only in isolation from the cultural and ecological community and in opposition to a person's perishable body.

It seems to me that in the human supremacist culture of the West there is a strong effort to deny that we humans are also animals positioned in the food chain. This denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our death and burial practices the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent any other thing from digging us up, keeps the Western human body from becoming food for other species. Horror movies and stories also reflect this deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life: Horror is the wormy corpse, vampires sucking blood, and alien monsters eating humans. Horror and outrage usually greet stories of other species eating humans. Even being nibbled by leeches, sandflies, and mosquitoes can stir various levels of hysteria.

This concept of human identity positions humans outside and above the food chain, not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity but as external manipulators and masters of it: Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. The outrage we experience at the idea of a human being eaten is certainly not what we experience at the idea of animals as food. The idea of human prey threatens the dualistic vision of human mastery in which we humans manipulate nature from outside, as predators but never prey. We may daily consume other animals by the billions, but we ourselves cannot be food for worms and certainly not meat for crocodiles. This is one reason why we now treat so inhumanely the animals we make our food, for we cannot imagine ourselves similarly positioned as food. We act as if we live in a separate realm of culture in which we are never food, while other animals inhabit a different world of nature in which they are no more than food, and their lives can be utterly distorted in the service of this end" (Plumwood 2011:7-8).

⁷⁷ See the further comment by Plumwood (2011:8): "Before the encounter, it was as if I saw the whole universe as framed by my own narrative, as though the two were joined perfectly and seamlessly together. As my own narrative and the larger story were ripped apart, I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, 'This can't be happening to me, I'm a human being. I am more than just food!' was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat. Reflection has persuaded me that not just humans but any creature can make the same claim to be more than just food. We are edible, but we are also much more than edible. Respectful, ecological eating must recognize both of these things. I was a vegetarian at the time of my encounter with the crocodile, and remain one today. This is not because I think predation itself is demonic and impure, but because I object to the reduction of animal lives in factory farming systems that treat them as living meat."

of its graves.”⁷⁸ Robert Farrar Capon regards resurrection as the very clue to eating. He insists that death is not an accident that overcomes life; it is the driving force of life: “It is by the deaths of chickens, chicory, and chickpeas that you have lived until today.”⁷⁹ This is exemplified by bread, especially the Bread of Life:

That’s where bread comes in as the great sacrament of life. Unless the seed has died there would have been no wheat; unless the what has been ground, no flour; without the destruction of carbohydrates by the yeast, no rising; without the murder of the yeast by fire, no finished bread; and without the finishing off the bread by you and me, no accomplished us at all. But the crucial point is that without this whole tissue of deaths at every moment, there simply would be nothing. Note well ‘at every moment’. Death is not an eventuality that with luck, waits for another day. It is today’s cup from which God insists now you drink.⁸⁰

This emphasis on resurrection will not resolve all problems. However, it does at least suggest that any theological interpretation of the act of eating (human or otherwise) – and predation as the correlate of eating – will need to be situated within an encompassing narrative of God’s work of creation, salvation and consummation.⁸¹ Nothing short of a fully Trinitarian theology would suffice, one that brings into play the full spectrum of Christological symbols (incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, session and parousia) and one that does justice to the structural differences between Christology and Pneumatology.⁸² However, calling for such a Trinitarian theology is far easier than offering one.⁸³ It remains rather elusive given the tendency to play the one off against the other. Does the Son need to correct the botched job of the Father who is responsible for predation? Does the Spirit share in the joy of eating (at the Father’s table) or is this joy, well, purely spiritual? Does the Spirit need to bring such joy through or independent of the kenosis of the Son? Eucharistic short cuts will not do here, even though this meal may serve as an appropriate lens to comprehend the complexity embedded in the most ordinary, daily act of eating.

The litmus test for any adequate theological interpretation of eating (and predation) is probably an eschatological one. How is eternal life (to use one highly contested eschatological concept) to be imagined? Will it involve both eating and predation (so that death has the last word)? Will there be eating but no predation (does this make any sense)? Or will there be no eating and therefore no predation (the Gnostic temptation)? What kind of life would such eternal life be? Or is our last best hope for life on earth to be recycled in order to continue as long as possible, if not forever (given the eventual heat death of the universe)? If so, what about the victims of history – will they never find justice? Although these questions on eternal life are of course highly speculative, they do help us to rethink the assumptions of living this life, here and now. Talking about eternal life is at best a radicalised way of re-describing and therefore interpreting this life. As Robert Farrar Capon

⁷⁸ The poem may, for example, be found at <http://www.bartleby.com/142/159.html> (accessed 2 June 2016).

⁷⁹ See Capon (1978:154).

⁸⁰ See Capon (1978:156). In a delightful comment Capon (1978:225) adds that resurrection is not something that we need to achieve: “Just be a good corpse; the rest was never up to you anyway.”

⁸¹ For a discussion, see Conradie (2015).

⁸² See Arnold van Ruler’s remarkable essay entitled “Structural Differences between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives” in 1989:27-46.

⁸³ See Arnold van Ruler’s equally remarkable essay entitled “The Necessity of a Trinitarian Theology” (in 1989:1-26) and, building upon that, Conradie (2013).

insists, “The world is no disposable ladder to heaven. Earth is not convenient, it is good. It is, by God’s design, our lawful love.”⁸⁴

From a theological perspective one needs to ask: What role is there for God as the triune Creator, Redeemer and Consummator of all things in this? Or is an emphasis on God’s Mind (God’s loving remembrance of all forms of life) the other side of an emphasis on God’s body (as process theology may wish to suggest)? Does this overcome the Gnostic eschewing of what is earthly, bodily and material? Is eating after all more a matter of mind than of body?

Of course these are speculative questions that cannot be answered. However, they at least indicate why the problem remains unresolved, why there remains, in my view, a collective theological failure to come to terms with eating because of a failure to come to terms with predation – understood here not only in terms of killing other animals for food but also as one metabolism absorbing any other.

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⁸⁴ Capon (1970:84).

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