
Book Review

Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), xiv + 233 pp., \$34.95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-602-58984-1.

In *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology of Food* Jennifer R. Ayres guides the reader through her understanding of food as a moral issue, including a primer on the global food system and examples of individuals and groups who are working on creating a healthier, more just food system. The book is specifically aimed at a Christian audience, using the metaphor of the Eucharistic table as theological grounding for the practice of caring for the Earth and its people. While Ayres did adequate work providing data on the global food system, the text shone in its inspiring examples of people working locally to enact a more just food system, and in her ringing conclusion regarding the importance of faith leaders activating the imagination of their congregations in order to envision the broadest possible interpretation of the Eucharistic table in its physical, present-world space. The text was somewhat lacking in research methodology, systematic presentation of theological ideas, and current data, but made up for it in stories of people of faith who are working to change the American food system for the better.

Given the plethora of books on similar themes already in print, the subtitle of the book offered the prospect of adding something new to the field.¹ Ayres calls her approach 'grounded practical theology', giving the term 'grounded' a double meaning: soil as the location from which 'good food' sprouts alongside the sociological research method of grounded theory. Ayres states her intention to combine sociology's grounded theory with practical theology, which would be an exciting development for research in matters of religion (p. x). The text unfortunately failed to deliver on this intention. Rather than a well-developed, grounded theory, Ayres presented a series of meager case studies to exemplify theological points she wants to make. Her promise to focus on an 'intimate and close observation of everyday life' fits into sociology's practice stories (a branch of narrative inquiry), but her research does not do the work of carefully compiling interview data that would be necessary in a sociological study from the standpoint of narrative inquiry, nor does it form the basis for a unifying theoretical framework based on coded interview data, as is done in grounded theory. Incorporation of social sciences research methodology would have done much to increase the usefulness and validity of this practical theology.

1. For example, the work of Bahnson 2013; Berry 2003; Boff 2008; Davis 2008; Deane-Drummond and Clough 2009; Gottlieb and Joshi 2013; McFague 2000; Wirzba 2011; and so many others.

As a work of theology it is only slightly more robust, presenting a bit of a structure for a Eucharistic table theology in Chapter 3. This is not done in a systematic way, however. It does not give a biblical or theological overview of table fellowship in the Christian scriptures or even a complete vision of Eucharistic passages in the New Testament. If one wants a more complete theology of food and the interconnectivity of caring for people and the land, there are other works already in print that do a better job.²

The data in Ayres' text is helpful as a starting point. The moment anyone puts data in print, however, it becomes outdated. Therefore, this 2013 text already needs some updating, especially in the section on the Farm Bill, which received a massive overhaul in 2014.³

This book comes into its own in Part II, which provides more of what Ayres promised in her subtitle: a grounded practical theology. Although it may not utilize grounded theory, this section is rooted in the soil, in the present, and explores examples of individuals and communities who are putting their theology into action in practical ways. Chapter 4 gives examples of creative solutions such as community-supported agriculture farms (CSAs) on church-owned land, farmers markets in church basements, 'eco-halal', and ideas for shifting the perspective of 'consumers' to people who see themselves as participants in the process of agricultural production. Ayres casts a vision of hope in the statement, 'If each church in rural Illinois were inspired by St. Matthew's [Evangelical Lutheran Church of Urbana, IL] example and contributed four acres to fruit and vegetable production, it is quite possible that the state would be markedly closer to having a thriving local food system' (p. 94). Chapter 5 tackles the issue of food insecurity and food deserts in the United States. Ayres relates examples of urban gardens utilizing a number of different organizational models, and encourages us to think in the direction of food sovereignty in each region rather than food security provided by big-box stores.

Encountering the 'other' and the complicity of those of us who live in the United States in the collapse of global food production and injustice to workers in other nations form the focus of Chapter 6. Ayres suggests cross-cultural trips to foreign countries, where those from the United States can learn to become partners with those in other countries through receiving hospitality in international homes. This chapter is the weakest of Part II. Ayres leaves the impact of fossil fuel use unexamined, and does not address the issue that not everyone from the United States can afford to take such educational trips, nor the latent paternalism present in the idea that relatively wealthy Westerners can visit 'the poor', see how they live, accept hospitality, and return home

2. See examples in n. 1.

3. The information Ayres provides about the Farm Bill is still correct regarding past impacts of the series of bills, but federal laws regarding crop subsidies and crop insurance have changed dramatically in the intervening years, making a big difference in strategies for overcoming commodification of the agricultural industry. The Farm Bill also made substantial cuts to the SNAP benefits program (formerly food stamps). Ayres gives a good entry point into the conversation, however, and much information can be found online to supplement her data, as long as the reader knows that more current information is necessary. For up-to-date information on the Farm Bill, refer to the USDA website, <http://www.usda.gov/farmland>. For a brief explanation of the pros and cons of the 2014 Farm Bill, see B. Ayres 2014.

genuinely transformed. Although Ayres' ideas regarding encountering the 'other' and learning to be a good neighbor in the global Eucharistic table are beautiful, she does not adequately explain ways these short-term trips actually transform the lives of those who go on the trips, at least not enough to offset the problems of fossil fuel use and opportunities for paternalism.

Returning to the United States, in Chapter 7, Ayres introduces us to Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, presenting its exemplary pedagogical model that incorporates work as part of one's education. Because Warren Wilson College is no longer firmly grounded in its Presbyterian roots, the culture of the school is not based in Christian theology. Ayres attempts to explain this for her Christian intended audience using Sallie McFague's understanding of the Earth as the body of God. This may be enough theological grounding for those who are already involved in ecotheology, but it is unlikely to convince Christians who are already leery of such arguments. Ayres created an excellent opportunity to highlight a faith-based institution that was consciously farming and gardening as an expression of practical theology.⁴ By showcasing an institution that is no longer specifically confessional, she missed the opportunity to draw in a group of Christian higher-education professionals who already struggle with extricating ecotheology from pantheism.⁵

The book concludes with a beautiful paean to the importance of hope and activation of the church's collective imagination. Ayres speaks of the healthy tension of the already-not-yet that we experience each time we make a 'little move' in the direction of a more just food system (p. 158). As we act in ways that imagine a flourishing food system, we experience a glimmer of the hope, joy, and celebratory *shalom* of the eschatological Eucharistic table. She discusses the delight she sees in the eyes of those whose stories she chronicled in this text, especially as they encounter beauty emerging from the dirt. Living in this way, she cautions, requires a healthy dose of 'creative maladjustment' as we joyfully envision and carry out an alternative, hope-filled reality (p. 164). Religious leaders hoping to encourage this way of life have an important tool in the imaginations of their congregations. As Ayres put it:

Imagination makes it possible for everyday visionaries to persevere, even thrive, within the global food system. In part, food practices cultivate eschatological imagination *because* they dwell in the mundane, nurturing attentiveness to the most ordinary stuff of the material world: dirt, water, sweat. People of faith who are capable of this kind of imagination invite all of us into deeper, more faithful dimensions of creativity (p. 163).

4. For example, Eastern Mennonite University, which houses students in LEED certified buildings and has five student- and faculty-led gardens that feed the campus as well as an ambitious compost program (<http://www.emu.edu/sustainability/>); or Goshen College, which has a garden, composting, winter garden boxes, and an environmental learning center called Mary Lea, complete with a sustainable farm as well as wilderness space where students learn about native ecosystems and sustainable land management from a Christ-centered perspective (<https://www.goshen.edu/sustainability/>).

5. McFague makes it clear that she is encouraging pantheism rather than pantheism, but this nuance is often lost unless an individual takes the time to read her full works (McFague 2008).

Those unfamiliar with this sort of practical theology will find this text useful. It contains helpful data as well as simple, New Testament-based theological grounding for why Christians should care for the Earth. The extensive bibliography provides an excellent list of resources for those who want to dig deeper.

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