
Book Review

Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 263pp., \$ 28.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781009012584.

Norman Wirzba has crafted a powerful, eloquent, reasoned, and important book that will be of value to scholars in ecotheology (and theology, broadly), environmental ethics, religious ethics, religion, and nature/ecology, the environmental humanities, and environmental studies; one that is a mix of engaged pantheistic ecotheological environmental agrarianism of and for the Anthropocene. As I reflect on the book and think through this review, I must conclude that Wirzba appears to have crafted a *magnum opus* for modern Christian theology: one where his own liberal Christian-influenced theology and activism, years of teaching and administrative leadership, ecological and theological agrarian concerns, and international contacts made over his career have culminated into a theological (i.e. a liberal Protestant approach) reflection on what it means to be alive during this time of climate crises, racialized violence, and ongoing settler colonialism that Wirzba collectively places within the Anthropocene.

The first part of the book provides an overview of Anthropocene data and literature and deconstructs transhumanist urges to send humans off-planet, or to reify entirely technological solutions to a list of deleterious environmental trajectories. The second part of the book then undertakes an exegesis of what it means to be human, where humanity is understood to be utterly dependent—physically, mentally, emotionally and key, spiritually—upon a living meshwork world that is the always ongoing site of God's created order and gift economy. The two parts of the book combine to address the 'three fundamental questions' asked in the book: '(1) Where are you? (2) Who are you? (3) How should you live?' (p. xiii). A key theme throughout the book is that these are theological questions related to normative understandings of what it means to be human, and that their answers imply that all life, including human life at both individual and communal levels, is sacred; and the task of being human during the Anthropocene is to therefore embrace living on a divine planet that humans, and not God, has wounded through human hubris, greed and lack of understanding what rooted life is. On rooted life, see especially Chapter 3, titled 'Rooted Life,' which provides an engaging and thought-provoking exegesis on creation, and especially the Garden of Eden story of Genesis.

Central to Wirzba's theology—and therefore a key premise of the book—is that 'To argue that the idea of life as divinely created, and therefore as also communicating a divine intention that both affirms the goodness of this given world, gives us a means for both evaluating particular events as catastrophic, and as calling people to work for creation's emancipation and burgeoning' (p. 137).

Wirzba maintains there is a 'logic of the sacred' (p. 139) at work in the created universe, and this implies God's always and ever ongoing grace of provision, for which humans should be grateful; and therefore, 'The focus and goal of our efforts...should not be to seek transportation to another world, but transformation of the desires and habits that are rendering our only world uninhabitable' (p. 44). This transformation will be one of values, and then, behaviors, as humans should understand the divine creation is one where 'life is a rooted, communal phenomenon' (p. 86) and that 'the important issues [is] one's habit of being' (p. 71) where 'there is no becoming apart from being-with' (p. 88).

Rather, God created the world and universe *ex amore* (p. 165), where the divine example of Jesus and his miracles points toward the possibility of liberation; to the possibility of each human to live an 'authentic human life' (p. 216) of service, creative humility, and embodying an understanding of reality via ecstatic and erotic sensibilities of sympathetic resonance with the rest of life with whom humans are always already in divine relation. For Wirzba, humans are in a mesh-world of co-becoming life where the world itself is 'inescapably embodied and [has a] symbiotic character of life' where such co-becoming at all times and in all places is the 'fundamental condition...that animate[s] and populate[s] a human life' (p. 63). Wirzba ends his treatise with various calls to bring humans into right alignment with divine intentions and to live in ways that can contribute to flourishing on a wounded world. Here humans must recover a covenant sensibility, advocate for transparent economies, reinvigorate democratic processes, build a life-supporting infrastructure, and attend to an interior life (on all of these, see chapter 8, 'Called to Creativity') to realize 'proper modes of activity' (p. 109) within an ontology of engagement. This ontology is tethered to the realization that 'We do better to think of God as the primordial, mysterious "power" opening time and space so that diverse, fertile, and fecund creaturely life can appear and develop' (p. 65).

This quick overview belies the depth of exploration Wirzba undertakes on most every page of the book. Wirzba writes with a voice of a master narrator, bringing vulnerability and compassion into discussing topics of great worth and meaning. I envision upper level, graduate, and faculty use of this book in a variety of settings, given what is covered and how it is covered. Indeed, I have already created an entire lecture based on insights from the book.

However, while reading, I did have a few questions I would pose to Wirzba, that I think the book does not fully address. The first is, who is your intended audience? For example, if it is liberal professors and theologians, then you have succeeded and it is not a hard 'sell' to many in these domains who likely agree with much of what you write. But if the 'problem' of human hubris and false ontologies is with conservative and fundamentalist theologians, especially Christian, or technofascists, then how do you envision them reading this, let alone being open to your theology? A second is, where are the non-male voices and perspectives? Wirzba articulates, eloquently and rightly, the various violences of the Anthropocene and current political moment on BIPOC and non-male bodies; however, the sources he utilizes are still too often male, and within that, white male voices. Third, Wirzba critiques naturalistic understandings of the universe (p. 158), but I am not sure those who hold a naturalistic understanding of reality will be swayed by this critique—why must one assume a divine creator, if the rest of what Wirzba is arguing is still possible to understand and believe without appealing to a divine presence that has created all? This, of course, is a theological

argument that is long-standing, and which it is not fair to expect one person to solve.

Lastly, and maybe most importantly (as there are profound implications that derive from this for multiple academic subfields in the environmental humanities, including religion and nature and ecotheology) is a throwaway footnote on pg. 16. Here, Wirzba is providing a background about cultural views of the natural world, and academic fault lines that have developed around studying these. In the footnote Wirzba quotes a 1970 article from the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, quoting Tuan, who wrote, 'In the play of forces that govern the world, aesthetic and religious ideals rarely have a major role' (p. 16). It's now 52 years later, and this insight still holds in many important ways; moreover, it is an insight that speaks against Wirzba's entirely salutary efforts in the book: to assume that one's understanding of reality may shift from reading about this reality being a divine creation within which humans must act in accordance with nurturing reciprocal gifts, as an antidote to healing the Anthropocene, may be entirely wishful thinking. I would ask Wirzba to spend more time on this insight and footnote, to utilize data that evidences how changing norms and worldviews can and does lead to new, more sustainable behaviors.

Overall, though, this book is a powerful gift. It deserves to be widely read, widely discussed, widely used, widely assigned, and widely appreciated. I know I will revisit it in various contexts multiple times in the years to come, finding within it continued nourishment, wisdom and ideas to mull over, as we all navigate the wounds of the world.

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