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Book Review: Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology*

In recent years, academic interest in food has expanded greatly within many disciplines and across them. The days when journals and publishers considered food a niche topic have passed. Writing from a practical theological standpoint, Jennifer Ayres's admirable contribution begins by analysing our global food system from a United States perspective. She then moves on to Christian practices that respond to the pathologies identified, providing some theological and moral reflection along the way.

Commendably, although eucharistic themes are frequently invoked they do not draw the discussion away from the reality of daily life. Rather, the Eucharist points to the truth that ordinary acts of food and eating are revelatory (p. 57). Indeed, even the elements that are used need to be called into question, with the wafers and wine often mass produced and the ingredients of grain and grape likely in some cases to have been harvested by undocumented migrant labourers.

Significantly, four moral commitments are outlined: the priority of the hungry, justice for farm workers, the responsible tending of the earth, and the ending of social and ecological alienation (pp. 64–73). These should challenge us all. Nevertheless, the scripture and tradition underpinning these commitments are largely hidden from view. Little is said about any of the 'seemingly countless' (p. 3) biblical texts on food, such as those on famine and the difficulties of food production. Moreover, the historical fragility of the food supply due to adverse weather, pestilence, war and the seasonal cycle, which Christian traditions of fasting and abstinence have endorsed, goes unrecognised. As a result, food security is sometimes held up as an achievable goal rather than as unlikely this side of the eschaton. Similarly, there is a running critique of industrial arable production and the 'factory' farming of animals, impelled not least by concerns about the risk of large-scale systems to disruption and their contribution to global injustice. Yet there are real, unresolved tensions here: if we are to feed the world's seven billion people, especially in urban conurbations, the attention to every seed planted that Ayres advocates won't always be possible.

The book's second half surveys four inspiring practical responses, narrating particular local projects that Ayres has visited. Church-supported farming contests the commodification of food and the power of the food corporations by bringing producers and purchasers together in local markets for commerce, fellowship and learning. Church urban gardening initiatives recultivate abandoned land, offering hands-on education and creating community through growing vegetables and fruit, turning food deserts into places where local people possess food sovereignty. On college farms, students experience a reinvented farm culture, learn to work the soil and acknowledge the moral demands it makes on them.

Perhaps the most striking project is 'transformative travel' (pp. 122–36), run by the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America and inspired by the critical pedagogy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. This takes place against the backdrop of a global food economy distorted by United States agricultural subsidies and trade agreements. Under the programme, privileged church groups visit farmworker households in Mexico in order to receive hospitality and better understand the impact of their food choices on these people. Members of these groups thereby begin to experience concrete accountability. Ayres writes:

To be welcomed to a kitchen table is to enter into the everyday with the host. By inviting her guests to the kitchen table, the host disrupts formalities. She invites the guests to tie on an apron, wash dishes, hear family stories, and laugh with one another. A kitchen table is simultaneously a place of intimate and vulnerable hospitality, in that guests are welcomed into the life and shared work of a home, and place of negotiation and justice, in that those seated at the table have voice, agency, and responsibility. (p. 130)

This discussion is enriched by some continental ethical themes. Ayres reminds her readers that, for Levinas, face-to-face encounter with the other is the true source of ethics. In the course of this encounter, the other maintains and even intensifies her alterity: no easy dialogue or quick resolution of asymmetrical power positions is possible. Equally instructive, if rather brief, is the use of Derrida to gesture toward some of the paradoxes of hospitality. On crossing the threshold, the guest enters into a space of shifting, exchangeable roles in which he or she may become the host and the host may become the guest. Misunderstanding and even the possibility of violence are never far away. Such realism tempers what could otherwise appear an all too straightforward prescription for solving multiple connected problems related to food production. Anything involving human beings is in reality complicated.

Ayres's discussion could be extended to a fuller consideration of animals, which in the present work feature only occasionally alongside many examples and issues from arable farming. In the United States over nine billion are slaughtered annually, and concerns are frequently raised about welfare standards. We are now all too aware that, globally, farm animals consume more crops than humans, even though many more naturally eat grass. Nevertheless, this major ecological challenge is not a reason to forget about welfare. Serious consideration of what it means for an animal to lead a good life, or at least a life worth living, yet again points to the complexity of the issues. A free-range dairy cow could be cold and malnourished in a field, and relatively unproductive, whereas a cow in a barn might well have all her needs met, as well as being milked intensively in order to help sustain human life. Although meat and dairy consumption certainly need to fall if they are to be sustainable in the context of a growing global population, criticisms of 'factory' farming are unhelpful if a viable alternative is not clearly defined. Moreover, the distinction between 'factory' animal farming and free range, and between intensive arable farming and local community gardening, is not clear cut. In order to advance understanding, detailed definitions will be needed rather than simple polarities.