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Stephen H. Webb. Good Eating

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Table of Contents

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Stephen H. Webb. *Good Eating*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001. Pp. 272. $21.99 (Paper).

[1] This is the first in a series of books, edited by David S. Cunningham and William T. Cavanaugh, devoted to theological reflection on everyday concerns. The series is sponsored by The Ekklesia Project, "an ecumenical gathering of pastors, theologians, and lay leaders committed to helping the church recall its status as the distinct, real-world community, dedicated to the priorities and practices of Jesus Christ and to the inbreaking Kingdom of God." (For more, see http://www.ekklesiaproject.org.) *Good Eating* offers a bold and promising start to the series, suggesting that more is intended than an interrogation of the usual suspects.

[2] Webb sets himself four goals: first, to characterize and defend, by contrast with "the utopian rigor of the animal rights movement," a diet, "biblical vegetarianism," that witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ; second, "to sort out what the biblical notion of stewardship means in our relationship to animals," affirming (by contrast, once again, with the animal rights movement - and, also, as it turns out, contemporary eco-theology) both human uniqueness and "compassion for all living creatures"; third, to offer a systematic, spiritual and theological foundation for Christian eating habits; and, fourth, to address historical questions regarding "diet, food and animals" as portrayed in the Bible and throughout Church history.

[3] On the whole, Webb succeeds admirably, displaying broad learning and theological acuity. Whether one agrees (as I do in large part) or disagrees, the book repays close attention to its central claims and arguments. In particular, Webb shows, contrary to now common criticisms, that it is possible for traditional Christian theists to take the interests and well-being of other animals seriously *for* reasons internal to their own faith; hence, the rubric of "biblical vegetarianism." Without attempting to engage the many, fascinating details, let me flag the main drift of Webb's argument.

[4] Chapter Three gets the argument underway, exploring the prominent, often ignored role of non-human animals in the biblical accounts of creation, flood, covenant and prophetic witness. Here, Webb finds much material supporting vegetarianism and, more generally, "the Dog Rule of animal compassion: Never do unto any other animal what you would not want done to your own dog" (81). Having argued that the main drift of the biblical account supports a compassion-driven vegetarianism, Webb engages two categories of countervailing evidence, involving, first, animal sacrifices in the Old Testament (Chapter Four) and, second, the consumption of animals by Jesus and his disciplines (Chapter Five). Webb is to be commended here for avoiding a dietary absolutism and, therewith, the false claim that there are no circumstances under which the use of animals for food is justified. Later, in his concluding Chapter Ten, Webb draws an illuminating parallel with the ideal of pacifism: in some cases, we are required by necessity (and all-encompassing love) to do what we had rather not.

[5] Having addressed these difficult cases, Webb offers a creative and, to me, at least, compelling portrayal of the Lord's Supper as a vegetarian meal. This, in turn, allows for a sacramental view of eating in general:

> If an animal needs to be eaten to keep humans alive, then such a tragic choice must be made. But most of us live in a society where animals do not have to die for us. We have plenty of nonmeat

> alternatives for our protein. Thus, when Christian vegetarians say grace before a meal, they are thanking God that Jesus Christ came to end unnecessary suffering and to teach us how to live in peace with each other and with the world (159).

This view is developed further in Chapters Eight and Nine relative to the ancient Christian practice of fasting, linked by Webb to the giving up (as in Lent) of meat and wine and, thus, the adoption of an essentially vegetarian diet. Webb traces the erosion of this ideal, from the Council of Gangra (c. 345) - anathematizing those, such as the Eustathians, who prohibit the eating of meat - to the Inquisition - where vegetarianism becomes a "veritable criterion" for the identification of Cathars - to the Reformation - where the idea of diet as spiritual/ascetic practice gets set aside as a way of addressing concerns regarding merit - until, finally, the memory of Christian vegetarianism fades away "as Americans begin to take advantage of the availability of cheap and plentiful meat" (212). In response to the resultant, cultural captivity of the church, manifest in every church picnic, Webb calls for an incorporation of "animal compassion into the rituals, prayers, and practices of the worshiping community": "What the church needs is not animal rights but animal rites" (225).

[6] Taking Webb seriously would give a new and more uplifting meaning to the phrase "fast food." Not all Christians, of course, will agree, in whole or in part. Though agreeing strongly with the main thrust of Webb's argument, I myself have a number of concerns with the way in which that argument is developed. Let me note two.

[7] First, while I consider myself very fortunate in the pets with whom I have shared a relationship - from Boots to Obie - and very much agree with Webb that there will be animals and plants in heaven, I disagree with the characterization of animals as "God's pets" and, therewith, the development of a "pet theology" (see 78-81 and, especially, Chapter Seven). It seems to me better in this regard to speak of animals as friends or, more narrowly, so as to honor the depth of human friendship, companions. After all, their primary reality is wild and, thus, other than our own; that is what makes them such valuable additions to our mundanely human lives. Similarly, I imagine that God, in sporting with Leviathan, views that great beast as a "pet" no more than he views us humans as "dolls" with whom he plays house. This, let me stress, is not to say I find nothing of interest or value in Webb's observations about pets. To the contrary, I was particularly struck by the way Webb draws on the "unwavering loyalty" of a pet dog to argue for animal immortality: "If God is love, then God will preserve every loving relationship in the world, turning our feeble and desperate attempts at attachment into something true, good, and everlasting" (161-62). This allows for an argument that goes beyond more standard appeals to compensation and fulfillment and focuses on the eternal value of mutuality; so it is a sentence that bears thought. In any case, however, more needs to be said along these lines. It would be interesting to see how Webb would develop and defend his view of animals in relation to the rights-based view of Andrew Linzey's Animal Theology (Illinois, 1995) and my own, overtly naturalistic Nature, God and Humanity (Cambridge, 2002), wherein I argue (following Basil and Thomas) that predation (in the wild) is an integral part of God's good creation.

[8] Second, the most disappointing aspect of Webb's book lies in his cursory account of and engagement with "the animal rights movement" and, more generally, alternative approaches to ecological theology. While offering in passing a number of what I take to be insightful criticisms-in-the-bud, Webb tends to hurry on so quickly he ends up treating those with whom he disagrees in the same dismissive manner traditional biblical theism is so often and wrongly treated by others. This is unfortunate, especially since on the basis of what Webb does say a more nuanced engagement would shed no little light.

[9] To conclude, while I find myself wanting more from Webb in the way of critical engagement and constructive development, what this book provides is quite valuable and well worth the read. I can see it being used with profit in a variety of educational contexts, from courses in Christian ethics - high school and undergraduate - to adult (and young adult) discussion groups in churches. It raises with clarity and vigor issues with which every Christian ought to be concerned and about which the vast majority remain sadly ignorant. In this and other respects it admirably fulfills the intent of The Ekklesia Project.

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