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*Special Book Review Essay*

*Who's Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood*

James K.A. Smith

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic

2014, 186 pp. softcover, \$19.99

*Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World*

Christian Scharen

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

2015, 117 pp. softcover, \$19.99

*From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World*

Norman Wirzba

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

2015, 162 pp. softcover, \$19.99

Well, the journey from Paris to Jerusalem continues as The Church and Postmodern Culture series has recently added *Who's Afraid of Relativism?*, *Fieldwork in Theology*, and *From Nature to Creation*. The series, now with ten books, was conceived to take postmodern philosophy and apply it to the life of the church. It was offered as “French lessons for the church” (from the series introduction). So, the driving question for the overall series at this point is both simple and fair: Has the church learned French (postmodern philosophy)? Of course, one does not just learn a language simply to say one has learned a language. The true measure of learning

a language is whether or not one may converse thoughtfully in different places, whether one's travel is eased and enriched by proficiency in a new language. So, have readers been able to learn French and then make the journey from Paris to Jerusalem (or from Binghamton, New York to Brockville, Ontario—my two cities of ministry since the series appeared)? Have readers been able to speak French—even in local clubs? Or, to put it another way, is there something different *in* the church on Sunday and *through* the church Monday to Saturday as a result of the series? It would be unfair to tackle these questions before exploring the most recent contributions, so let's examine them in turn.

### Who's Afraid of Relativism?

Christians should be relativists. That is the ambitious thesis of James K.A. Smith's essay, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?* The work, necessarily limited to maintain a certain amount of readability, aims to offer a more robust version of relativism that stands up under the attacks of those who would declare the concept a nonstarter in Christian thought. As such it is more descriptive than thorough. While Smith anticipates certain critiques, he does not always answer them as fully as the unconvinced reader might require.

Smith initiated the series by examining the “unholy trinity” of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault (11), and he continues it by accessing and unpacking a new trio: Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom. Smith examines relativism from the perspective of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophy of contingency and community. Our selves, and hence our knowledge, *depends*. Smith argues that this kind of relativism is in line with the Christian doctrine of creation. Human beings are creatures and this impacts our accounts of knowledge and truth (36). Smith unpacks Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom in successive chapters before offering these insights for theological work in a postliberal age.

The essay is a rejection of the correspondence theory of knowledge and the representationalist account of language, where words refer to things. Wittgenstein, of course, notes that language is more than reference; that language *does* things and that what language does is beholden to the community in which it is used. Words do more than refer. They are part of a way of life and can only be understood in these contextual language-games. Words are used well because users know how to use them, even if the user does not know all the rules of the game. This is the undoing of (one sort of) realist world because the reference model is undone in that the “connection between words and the world is contingent” (52). Instead, language has meaning by virtue of the agreement between users of the language. The possibility of this agreement precedes meaning—“the web of

meaning” we inherit “is the product of social construction” (53). Smith does not believe this falls into nihilism—where there is no meaning, but instead affirms that there are rules to the language game that can be articulated and that must be followed and that meaning is tied to the language game and never escapes a context.

Smith believes that language games ought not to be foreign to Christian thinking connecting the concept with Augustine’s distinctions between things/signs and between use/enjoyment. Because things and signs can overlap in the same subject, communities determine when things are things, when they are signs; communities also teach what is to be used and what is to be enjoyed. The proper understanding and use of the concepts is tied to a language game. Here Smith’s argument runs into trouble. Smith writes, “The use/enjoyment distinction is not ‘objective’ in the sense that it can be just ‘read off’ the world before us. The very distinction between use and enjoyment...is *relative to* a story, the story revealed in the Scripture proclaimed in the gospel, and handed down to us in the body of Christ” (71). It seems that this distinction is relative to this theological story in that other stories might disagree about what is to be used and what is to be enjoyed. It could even be observed that the categories ‘use’ and ‘enjoy,’ not just what goes into these buckets but the categories themselves, are arbitrary to this theological story. Thus far, there seems little to challenge. Yet Smith’s conclusion is a little more interesting: “Even when we take the distinction [between use/enjoyment] to be *true*, receiving this as the ‘true story of the whole world,’ we are always already dependent upon this social context of reception and proclamation, this community of practice that teaches us how to *mean* the world as a gift” (71-72, italics in original). Of course one claims truth from a point of view. Yet if the word *true* is to have any sense, it must not be limited to the story itself. The claim to truth is not that one has no point of view, but that one’s point of view enables them to see accurately—better than others. The story, the point of view, either helps its inhabitant/observer to see the world rightly or it doesn’t. The world is seen from a point of view but the world is not limited to the perspective taken. When Smith says that the story reveals it does not necessarily mean that what is revealed is relative to the story. That a story/linguistic community is the means of relation (communication) does not mean that what is related/communicated is *only true* relative to the community. Communities can see outside themselves; they simply cannot see *from* outside themselves. The means of communication does not necessarily change the nature of what is communicated. Yet, this seems to be the big conclusion drawn from Smith’s engagement with Wittgenstein.

The implications of this conclusion are then teased out as Smith considers Rorty. Most scrutinized is Rorty’s claim that “truth is what your peers will

let you get away with saying” (73). Rorty’s point is to break us from the Cartesian paradigm of inside/outside, where the desire is to match what is inside the brain (thought) to what is outside the brain (object). While Locke followed Descartes, obsessing with how the mind actually makes this connection, Kant does away with the inside/outside paradigm saying that everything is in the mind. The mind is what makes the object what it is—the mind constitutes the object. Against this paradigm, Rorty says that knowledge is cultural rather than individual. It is more about the give and take of a culture’s conversation than the individual’s “confrontation” with the outside world. Rorty does not believe this means there is no “ontological weight” to things. Rejecting the correspondence theory of truth is not to reject that things are independent of theories (87). But isn’t this just what is at stake—that some things are real and true regardless of their being contextualized? *Truth* is the category appropriate to a culture’s story inasmuch as the story lines up (corresponds?) with what is real. Its truth is relative not to the story itself, but to reality being related by the story.

Smith might object that there is no foundation outside the game created by the community telling its story, in which case it seems to me that the notion of truth is lost as a possible adjudicator between the stories of two or more cultures. Smith objects to the notion of adjudication, presumably, because it might rely on a universal language or foundation. There is worry that making a decision between truth claims might pretend the adjudicator occupies a space outside the world. After all, one cannot escape the “community of practice that is the locus of meaning [because it] is always already embedded in the world” (94). Objective truth is critiqued because it seems to remove the knower from reality. To be embedded in the world means that our encounter with truth is not against it, but within it.

Smith says that Rorty’s pragmatism embraces our creaturely dependence. Rorty’s belief that valuations are relative to (dependent upon) communities and their social practices does not mean Rorty is a nihilist (98). Instead, Smith argues that such dependence is a mark of being a creature: “Our dependence on the divine is inextricably bound up with our dependence on other human beings. This is why we are not merely dependent but also social” (99). Yet, is human interdependence really “inextricably bound up” with divine dependence? Can humans breathe life into other humans without first being sustained by the Creator? Is it not true that the dependence of the entire creation on the Creator is a categorically different kind of dependence than its internal interdependence? Does the Creator’s communication to a community through a story not have subsequent implications for the nature of knowledge—found within that story, of course, but with implications for all other narratives and communities of practices?

One gets the impression that there is room for proper evaluation between narratives when Smith says that Rorty not a skeptic. “There are good and bad construals, better and worse accounts. But ‘good’ and ‘better’ accounts are not so because they have managed to mirror reality and escape the contingent, social conditions of knowing. No, good and better accounts are those that better enable us to cope with the obduracy of things...” (100). What does it mean for an account to truly enable one to “cope with the obduracy of things” except that it mirrors reality? A map helps to keep me from bumping into trees, poles, and ditches inasmuch as it keeps me on the road.

Smith believes that that Christian faith becomes the revelation that breaks into the world that allows the believer to move and live well. Revelation does not pull us out of the world, but comes to us, kenotically (110). “Everything we know and confess as Christians is *relative to* this (contingent, historical) revelation, and our reception of this *as* revelation is dependent upon our inculcation in the community of social practice that is the church. There is now no revelation outside the church because there is no meaning that is not ‘use’” (112, italics in original). Once again, is this really true? Adam, Noah, and Abraham all have divine encounters outside an established “discursive community of practice.” Jesus encounters God’s voice without the community’s affirmation. Is there a community involved in that none of these men are completely isolated (with the possible exception of Adam)? Of course. Is there revelation outside the church? Indeed. Does the Holy Spirit bear witness outside the church with a person? Did the Lord Jesus encounter Saul within the church? These counterexamples are meant to show that a philosophy of pragmatism cannot be developed outside a theological context. If one’s discursive community of practice is the church, then revelation is the starting point rather than what subsequently needs to be shoehorned into a philosophy. It is theology that illumines the philosophy of pragmatism, not vice versa. Everything is relative to the story of God, to the claims of theology as they are faithful to the revelation of God. That, it seems to me, is what people mean when they claim something as absolute truth.

Smith’s final two chapters look to take the re-orientation offered by Wittgenstein and Rorty and make them applicable through the philosophy of Robert Brandom in the context of Christian doctrine. Smith wants to maintain a place for the truth of doctrine without forsaking the pragmatism previously argued. So, Smith accesses Brandom’s categories of implicit and explicit: Christian doctrine is making explicit (knowing that) of the Christian faith what is implicit (the know how) in it. Smith points to the cultural-linguistic paradigm of George Lindbeck as a test case. Since doctrine is cultural-linguistic, it means that there is no lone knower,

no isolated individual capable of “processing facts and claims against ‘reality’” (171). Clearly, Smith is in favor of the Christian community and sees it as necessary.

Yet, Smith’s claims seem to soften toward the end:

[P]ragmatism’s appreciation of the contingent, communal conditions of knowledge does not undercut the ability to make universal claims, nor does it preclude the possibility of asserting universal norms. It only means that it is impossible to see or grasp such norms from ‘nowhere’ or from an ‘absolute’ standpoint.... Instead of undercutting the uniqueness of Christianity, then, this pragmatist account actually heightens it: to see and understand and grasp those ‘universal’ features of God’s creation requires the unique capacities bequeathed to us by the community of practice that is the body of Christ. Christian revelation is not less important in this picture, but more. (173)

So, communities can make universal truth claims. One wonders all the fuss, then. Consider the question: Which came first: The truth claim or the community? If the community came first, then it seems there is a time when the truth claim was not universal, and, therefore, is not truly universal. If the truth claim came first, then the entire pragmatist project is lost because things are not purely contingent and communities are not the source of meaning. They are the context in which truth is discovered and revealed. One does not need to stand outside a community to make such a claim. One only needs to see that this binary logic is true to all communities.

### Fieldwork in Theology

Let’s move on to the next installment. *Fieldwork in Theology* by Christian Scharen is written with five big ideas that are related clearly in a way that forms the book’s progression: The world matters; research is self-reflective; bodies are our context for research; understanding comes through embodied practices; Christians can immerse bodily for research. Scharen begins with a passionate plea for the church and for individual Christians to “wake up” from the slumber of Christendom. “Suffering, healing, reconciling, and doing justice” call our best attention and participation with the Spirit (5); the same Spirit who makes our wakefulness possible and calls our obedience. Only when Christians are awake can we understand “the complexity of this beautiful and broken world” (5). And what it will take to understand is *fieldwork in theology*: the “careful, disciplined craft [of] inquiry...[that] seeks both to claim knowledge of divine action and to discern an appropriate human response” (5). What fieldwork in theology looks like is the subject of the book.

Fieldwork in theology begins with an emptying—a “dispossession,” to use Rowan Williams’ phrase—that takes its cues from the incarnation. To understand, the Christian must also live in the *field*—the social context of an actual life—and develop a *habitus*—a set of practices that form the mode of being in the field. Both of these are concepts from Bourdieu that can only be applied when there is a break from commonsense interpretation and a break within the researcher personally, so that the researcher and method of research are being under investigation, as well. Scharen nicely performs this reflexive task with a cursive (by necessity, as the book is a tidy 114 pages) academic and biographic contextualization of Pierre Bourdieu and short windows into Scharen’s own personality and method through examples of research projects and illustrations using contemporary music. This reflexive task is necessary because of sin: we cannot be hubristic in our understanding, as though we have not been affected by sin. Instead, we must enter another’s story, much as God has done in the incarnation, and understand within the lived context of the other.

Entering the context of another is an embodied experience. “Our bodies...are our very means for relating to and living meaningfully in the world” (51). We understand as we encounter. Here Scharen has a nod to the phenomenology—“a way to pause and notice how it is that one has a world” (53)—and illustrates with the game of soccer. The soccer field is not an object for study, but the plane on which the game is played and the field that forms certain rules and actions. Consider the incarnation as methodological mandate: Jesus did not understand the human field by distant observation, but through entering the field. Yet, Jesus’ life is what makes our Christian research possible in that Jesus did not succumb to the wrong “rules” of the game, but performed God’s love, God’s mercy, and God’s life without pause, which opens the possibility for our self-giving love—our wakefulness. “We have no other language for the unity of God but this story of risk lived in Jesus. We...cannot say what God is in God’s essence save what we can say by the narrative of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection” (84). Yet while our previous failures must cause humility, still the Spirit’s power enables humble action.

This sanctified immersion removes the privileged vantage point of the observer but makes possible “practical mastery” of the other’s practices (75). In this line of thinking, the reader is given new reflections for the practice of repentance—a kind of changing within one’s field and of one’s improper *habitus* that is Christocentric. There is no repentance with the turn to Christ; instead there is only bondage in one’s inherited context. Freedom outside the structure of the field for the benefit of the field is strictly a *theological* possibility. Yet the reader is not permitted to become too abstract. No, life is always lived—and done so Christianly in the concrete practices of the church. These concrete practices by

flesh and blood people are theologically revealing, exposing the actual beliefs of a community, whether coherent or not.

Finally, the urging of Scharen is not just for the reader to learn about fieldwork in theology, but to become a theologian in fieldwork: Explore the world; immerse in the contexts being studied; develop a *habitus* in the world but without forgetting that all of this began as a *dispossession* in light of the incarnation and by the power of the Spirit. As Bourdieu's student Wacquant said of the methodology he developed in light of *field* and *habitus*: "Go ahead, go native, but come back a sociologist!" (100), so might Scharen say: "Go ahead, go native, but come back a Christian!" In fact, Scharen might say that the only way to go is not to go native, but to go *as a Christian*: learn within and as the body of Christ. "Sometimes, in witnessing a life in the self-forgetting of this exercise in understanding, 'the most important thing is to silently wait.' Here, in the holy moment of deep silence, listening to another find words for the experience of his or her life...the whole practice of research is subsumed by our participation in listening as God does, the God who bends near to hear our cries" (114).

Scharen has exemplified the best of the *Church and Postmodern Culture* series by expressing difficult thinkers in accessible and practical ways. The book exemplifies its own value by being remarkably self-aware. Scharen writes with crystal clarity, but refuses to write as though the concepts are obvious and reminds the reader that the concepts are not simple. The presentation is clear and compelling but the reader knows that undertaking fieldwork in theology will be a challenging task.

Perhaps the challenge of fieldwork in theology is illustrated by Scharen's critique of Hauerwas and Willimon's *Resident Aliens*. Scharen reads Hauerwas and Willimon as developing a community whose home is elsewhere, which facilitates an identity and action plan that is "over against the world" (8). Scharen reads this mandate as developing a community aside from the communities of the world, where Christian formation and discipleship themselves are witnesses to the world. Now, this read of Hauerwas and Willimon is possible, though in the forms of life, which this theology developed in me, and my fellow seminarians where the book was required reading, I rarely encountered such a sectarian expression. I often experienced quite the opposite of what Scharen feared. And I certainly did not encounter communities that sought a "disembodied home elsewhere" (13). Perhaps Hauerwas and Willimon are doing what Scharen advises in research methodology: they are taking sin seriously. For Scharen, sin-inspired skepticism suggests the researcher enter the other's context and to remain self-reflexive in critique while performing analysis. For Hauerwas and Willimon, sin chastens the efforts of the

believer that she or he may make the world more just. As Hauerwas says, “[The] first task of the church is not to make the world more just but to make the world the world.”<sup>1</sup>

### From Nature to Creation

Living rightly in the world requires a rigorous theological vision. Christians have thought too narrowly about this kind of life, perhaps defaulting to relational, political, economic, even psychological life. Norman Wirzba’s slender volume is a passionate call to expand the Christian vision to include the whole world. *From Nature to Creation* is not just a title, but the movement Wirzba seeks for readers to become people who can “nurture and heal and celebrate the gifts of God” (1). Put most clearly, Wirzba says that “is a contradiction to profess belief in God the Creator and then live in ways that degrade and destroy God’s creation” (25). If the world is simply *nature*, then harmful activity follows; if it is *creation*, then human beings are placed within it and have responsibilities to it. Wirzba unfolds the move from nature to creation, fleshing out the vision of Christian creaturely living, through five big ideas.

First, to live rightly requires that we narrate and name the world rightly. Naming and narrating well involves proper understanding of what something is and where it comes from (and where it is going). Matter is not amoral and so things cannot be categorized simply for economic value (or other subjective values). For example, animals are not meat machines; plants are not pharmaceutical resources; human beings are not (simply) consumers. This wrong naming is a result of deficient theology. Wirzba notes that on the heels of Nietzsche’s death of God there was the death of everything else (6). Without a creator to guide the naming and narrating of creation, human beings filled the void, becoming “creators of worlds of their own imagining” (15) and subsequent (ab)users of this world. It became more important to know and use the world than to love it, and so poisoned water, eroded soils, detonated mountains, cleared forests, melting glaciers, animal and plant extinction, and expendable laborers resulted (13). No longer servants and priests, but now engineers and technicians (16), human beings lost the vision that the world is “God’s love made visible, fragrant, tactile, audible, and delectable” (21). Yet Jesus re-narrates the world—including—the “who, where, and how of human life” (24)—by recapitulation. He is the true human being and by his redemption of creation, Christians may live in the world differently because Christians live in a different world.

Second, the best understanding of living wrongly in the world is through the lens of idolatry. When the good gift of creation is made into an idol, then it

ceases being creation and becomes nature. Wirzba traces two meanings of nature, each with harmful consequences. “Nature” can be the internal principle or power or process “whereby a thing is what it is” or “by which it achieves its end” (33). It can also mean wildness—the world that exists without human interference (35). These options may leave people inattentive of nature, abusive toward nature, or willing to dominate and manipulate its power for human gain.

Wirzba grounds this errant approach to the world in nominalism—the belief that a thing is what it is as a result of the name given to it. This view primarily understands the creative act of God as an act of power, deemphasizing wisdom or purpose in the things God made (41). Since God hasn’t given a purpose, humans can make their own purpose for the world and its contents. Whereas the earlier vision of humanity was to contemplate the world and to belong “harmoniously” within it, “‘subject to’ order and purposes beyond [the subject’s] own devising... now the purpose of life [is] to give expression *to oneself* in one’s actions in the world” (45). Wirzba challenges this shift of modernity because it sets human beings over against nature. Rather than believing there is a valueless access to the world, waiting to be named by our values, Wirzba argues that humans should see themselves as part of the objective world and because humans are part of the world, humans must be careful of the desire to know the world (52-53). Overemphasized and divorced from loving the world, the pretension to knowledge removes the world’s alterity. Rather than being part of the world, humans make the world subject to their desires. In this inequality, with the world ordered to the subject’s desires, the world becomes unlovable.

This phenomenon of using but not loving the world shows the full duplicity of idolatry. Wirzba leans on Jean-Luc Marion to describe idolatry, who argues that idols are not self-made, but made by idolaters. The idol does not cause the lusting gaze, but “the gaze makes the idol” (51). In the context of the death of God, nature becomes the source of life, subject to the human’s desires: Simultaneously, nature is degraded and idolized by wrong perception.

All is not lost, however, because, third, human beings can learn, through practice and transformation, to perceive the world as God’s creation and good gift. “To know imaginatively is to try to see the world with the love by which God sees and sustains the world” (4). Yet how important is the word *try*? Can this vision be accomplished? As Wirzba asks, “Is a nonidolrous form of perception possible?” (69). Is it possible to live outside the utilitarian, frenzied, transient, disconnected form of life that not only shapes *how* we perceive but also *what* technology and media allow us to perceive? To fix this errant, surface-level gaze, to sense and to see the love of God in ever deeper ways (72), Wirzba suggests *icons*. Because divine

energy (as distinct from God's essence) is found in all of creation, icons allow the observer to practice seeing beneath the surface, to become enabled to see the beauty of God's creation as the love of God made tactile. In this practice, human desire may be transformed and trained—purified and cleansed—to seek the wellbeing of the other (92).

Fourth, in this transformation, human beings are connected with the rest of creation, becoming ever increasingly aware of their dependence on the life and death of other creatures to survive. This mutual interdependence of creation requires love. Wirzba wants human beings not just to have “information about the world” but “capacities that will help us [to] love the world” (3). To develop these capacities requires a proper theological anthropology. Wirzba thus argues for a human being to be understood not primarily as a *subject* but as a *creature*. This anthropology not only reminds the human being of her physicality and subsequent dependence on land and other creatures for life, but it also shapes the metaphysical framework of a truly theological ecology: human beings are part of the good creation of God, interdependent on each other, and ultimately dependent on God. Wirzba utilizes the helpful description of non-competitive transcendence. That is, the interdependence creatures have on each other is of a different kind than the creation's complete dependence on God.

Finally, Wirzba argues that practicing creatureliness will lead human beings to maintain a posture of thanksgiving. Contra Derrida, Wirzba not only believes that gifts are possible, but that gifts are *necessary* because they create and maintain relationships of mutual thanksgiving marked by ceremony and beauty. Good gifts do not restrain freedom, create obligation, harm the other, or place the other in debt, but they do connect people (140-41; 150). Ironically to the postmodern ear, to seek the phenomenon of a pure gift—a gift that does not create ongoing context—“is to desire the death of relationship, which is necessarily also the death of life!” (149). Further, gifts undermine the role of money, which creates a world of simple exchange, where “one does not need to say sorry or thank you” (141). When we realize that all of life is gift, we will live in a posture of thanksgiving, holding carefully the gifts received and holding open-handedly the gifts that we pass on. Once again, such a life of thanksgiving among creatures is not in competition with God. Instead, the life of creaturely thanksgiving naturally flows to the praise of God, the Creator (156).

Now that the work has been summarized, let us examine *From Nature to Creation* critically. Wirzba desires not only to help his readers name and narrate the world rightly, but, presumably, to do so himself. Thus, at places where the world is described incongruently with the world readily seen by this reader, at least, then

questions need to be raised. An example: Wirzba leans on Jeffrey Bishop's "The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying" in a description of the narrow anthropology in today's medicine and medical education, describing Bishop's thought as follows: "[T]oday's doctors are being trained to bracket and ignore the messiness of the lives of patients who eat, work, and live in families and communities because these 'external factors' unnecessarily complicate the neat analysis of individual bodies described as physiological machines" (15). I have experienced the care of a handful of doctors through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in various locations through two countries. This does not describe my experience. Does it accurately describe *the* world of western medicine or *a* world or is it a caricature?

Wirzba may also miss true narration of the world. It has been said that in the Old Testament, *land* is so prominent that it is almost a character. *Almost*. At times the land seems a character itself in *From Nature to Creation*. For example, Wirzba, quoting Wendell Berry, writes "[R]e-enter the woods. For only there can man encounter the silence and darkness of his own absence. Only in this silence and darkness can he recover the sense of the world's longevity, of its ability to thrive without him, of his inferiority to it and his dependence on it.... That is, he must re-enter the silence and darkness and be born again" (106). This, simply, is not the vision of Eden, where humanity is given the vision of a world thriving because of the order and structure provided by God, yet from where humanity is to bring order and form to the rest of the world. The world does not thrive, in the Edenic vision, without humanity. Without humanity extending the work of God throughout creation, the forest is chaotic, its silence and darkness is the absence of humanity, but it is not a sign of flourishing, but of humanity's failure to live the role of God's image on earth. What a thriving forest looks like, sadly, we can hardly imagine. Put another way, humans are not born again *within* the forest, but *for* the forest. The forest does not thrive without humanity; it thrives with *proper* humanity.

This does not negate the value the forest may hold to show humanity a world marked by human absence. That world will not be marked by human failure and so may present a unique vision of such a world. But neither will it be marked by human flourishing, which is the pinnacle of the creation narrative with humans in God's image.

Wirzba's compelling vision, then, would be improved by accessing the priestly role given to Adam. Adam's responsibility to cultivate and keep the creation (Gen. 2:15) can also be understood as "serving and guarding," which are the priest's roles (Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 1 Chron. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14).<sup>2</sup> Wirzba's own advocacy of the practice of gardening challenges the idea of the forest producing true

humans. In the forest, in a sense, nothing *thrives* because there is no true mutual relationship, but only adaptation and survival. Creation longs for the revealing of God's sons and daughters not only because without redemption, humans contribute to the world's brokenness, but because through redemption humans are the means of its flourishing.

These encouragements are offered to strengthen Wirzba's presentation and extend, hopefully, his perception of the world. Readers want to perceive the world more deeply, more truly because of Wirzba's work, and Wirzba offers simple practices that may help: eating, gardening, sharing. We eat with intention because "food is God's love made delectable" (124). We garden because we can better perceive the dependence we have on land. We visit farms to see where food comes from (127). All of this is meant to ground thanksgiving in the beautiful, ceremonial daily life of God interacting with God and God's creatures.

## Conclusion

Let me finish with a few observations and subsequent recommendations. First, of the 39 endorsements on the back covers, 34 are from individuals explicitly connected with a college, divinity or graduate school, university or seminary. There are no back cover endorsements from people explicitly connected with a church. This discrepancy is especially key when the series aims to be speaking to the church. That academics have endorsed the work is not inappropriate, but engaging intentionally with current or recent pastors would have been more appropriate. After all, if the goal was to influence the church, why not seek the endorsement of the most influential churches? Endorsements from Brian McLaren (*Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*) and Marva Dawn (*Liturgy as a Way of Life*) are examples of people attempting to live at the intersection of church and academy, but perhaps Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, or Andy Stanley would have served the purpose, as well; perhaps pastors who write a little more academically, like Tim Keller; perhaps people who have served closely with (or even in) the church like Brenda Psalter McNeil, Nancy Beach, Francis Chan, or Sally Morgenthaler. There is no need to belabor the point, which remains, simply, writing for the church requires interacting with people who lead and shape actual local churches. To influence the church will require the series to write with an audience in mind that listens to a different set of endorsements.

A second observation: The series is made up entirely of male authors. I offer this not as a critique, but simply as an observation. It is possible (even likely) that female authors were invited but have declined. It is also possible that female authors are slated for future contributions. However, the observation is necessary in a series that intends *deconstruction* as a category and practice for Christian thinking.

So, with ten volumes, has the church learned French from the Church and Postmodern Culture series? Are churches different on Sunday? Are communities different through the church's ministry Monday-Saturday? *Perhaps*. To use Smith's phrase, *it depends*. To answer the question depends on what "learning French" really means. Does it mean to become fluent in the language of Continental postmodern philosophy? Or does it mean to become fluent in categories impacting the church? If the former, then no; if the latter, then perhaps. The series has widened its focus as it has progressed—something that has been beneficial to the readers, but makes it difficult to evaluate the series on its initial commitment. Perhaps we could say that the series began to teach its readers French, but has taken liberties to stray from the language itself, pointing out how French is related to other languages along the way.

When I was in high school, I looked forward to my favorite classes with anticipation. Often the best classes were the ones that provided some freedom for student led discussion and analysis. The best classes allowed students to think about and speak to the contemporary events in the context of the lesson. Likewise, I look forward to every installment in this series, believing that each lesson will help me to address and consider current events from a different angle. Baker Academic and James K.A. Smith are to be commended for the series. I hope they keep teaching.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000), p. 157 as quoted by Stephen Lawson, "Moltmann, Hauerwas, and Barth on the Relationship between the Church and 'the Political.'" <https://stephenlawson.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/moltmann-hauerwas-and-barth-on-the-relationship-between-the-church-and-the-political/>. Accessed October 6, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. Vol. 17. InterVarsity Press, 2004.

