

Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021). 300 pp. RRP \$114.25 Hardcover.

1. Summary

This book is focused on three fundamental and perennial questions: (1) Where are you? (2) Who are you? (3) How should you live? (xiii) An opening illustration helpfully shows the interrelation between people and place. If you believe yourself to be in a kitchen, then cooking is appropriate behaviour and practising gymnastics is not. "The place speaks to who you are and what you should do." (xiii) The kind of world in which we live then determines appropriate human behaviour. *This Sacred Life* "is an extended argument for the sanctity of places, humans and fellow creatures, and the work people do." (xvii) It is earthy and artistic, philosophically reflective, unflinchingly critical, celebratory yet realistic, prophetically activist, and hopeful.

The first of the book's three sections focuses on the contemporary effort directed at denying or overcoming the human condition as needy and dependent. The first chapter is a hard-hitting overview of our Anthropocene era, which can be understood as the desire of some people to live without limits. (28) In this Anthropocene era humans, through their technologies, can alter life at cellular and atmospheric levels, degrading the world to the point of making it uninhabitable for multispecies. Human destruction of the land, while not new, can now effect change on a planetary scale. Wirzba calls for a different human outlook, posture, and engagement toward the planet: from mastery, independence, limitless expansion, and abuse; to respect, interdependence, limits, and responsibility. The second chapter explores transhumanism, with its resistance to human limitation and mortality. Readers unfamiliar with these two subjects will find Wirzba's account disturbingly instructive.

In Part II 'Turning to the Fundamentals', Wirzba expounds two central metaphors for creaturely life: meshwork and rootedness. These chapters are detailed, thorough, persuasive, and movingly written in describing "the inescapably embodied and symbiotic character of life" (63). Riffing off the well-known close relationship between humanity (Adam) and soil (Adamah), Wirzba declares: "human beings are soil-birthed and soil-bound." (69) Where he adds value is showing this interconnectedness through the congruous insights of modern science and north American indigenous perspectives. Modern science enables us, in a detailed manner, to "consider the lilies of the field", and from plant life learn much about human life. Life is, in truth, rooted and communal. (86) The relentless argument is made against an atomistic worldview. For all creatures, including humankind, "our being is always a becoming characterized by receiving and giving, touching and being touched, eating and being eaten, and influencing and being influenced." (76)

In chapter 4 Wirzba proposes the language and metaphor of meshwork for all creation, and warfarer for human beings. A 'meshwork' is a field of dynamic interaction that remains open. In such a world there are no discrete objects with firm boundaries, for life is permeable. This argument is supported by unmasking and criticising metaphors that encapsulate other ways of viewing the world: GPS, map, container, globe, network. This discussion is interesting, insightful, and has significant theological import. Wirzba's primary interlocutors are an anthropologist and members of indigenous Canadian tribes. References to theologians and biblical scholars are noticeably absent, and some theological concerns elided. Where theology is explicit it is viewed through an agrarian lens, highlighting Jesus' fondness for horticultural imagery.

In the remainder of the book Wirzba elaborates on the rootedness and meshwork nature of creation, especially vis-à-vis human beings. In preferring verbs over nouns, he thus defines being human: "the wayfarer is his or her movements within entanglements that are themselves constantly on the move." (121) Since being is in fact in flux, in relationship, and in action, then knowledge must have a narrative dimension at its core since narrative better describes the truth that "things and not simply events occur." (115) The omission of any interaction with process thought is unexplained.

Throughout the book Wirzba critiques philosophies that desacralize creation by reducing it to an immanentist frame. Methodological naturalism and pantheism both remain trapped in an immanence that effectively results in an ecological relativism and utilitarianism which cannot justify environmental protection over plunder, with destructive consequences. This comes into view in the final chapter, in which Wirzba develops a theology of work via an extended criticism on the deleterious politico-economic effects of industrialisation.

Against immanentist language, Wirzba anchors creation's sacredness in a discussion of God's transcendence and immanence. A doctrine of creation affirms creation as gift, and creation-care as the necessary response. Creatures are "material and embodied expressions of a divine investment that communicates that it is very good for them to exist and thrive." (151) Creation's goodness is juxtaposed with the presence of evil. While not flinching from describing some of evil's horrors, evil and sin are not original to creation but derivative. He describes "the primordial goodness and beauty of the givenness of things." (140) This was helpful, but the related subject of so-called natural evil was mostly passed over.

This Sacred Life offers readers a relational ontology. Rather than follow the (deservedly) well-trodden path of trinitarian relational ontology leading to a relational anthropology, the reflections are more philosophical in nature. For example, influenced by Jeremy Begbie's work on music, Wirzba opts for auditory rather than spatial language, for it better characterises "the call/response, receiving/giving, structure of life" by showing how creaturely subjectivity and concurrence is not competitive but interpenetrates while preserving distinctiveness. (184)

2. Reflections

As one unfamiliar with Wirzba I was surprised that this work was more philosophical than theological and biblical (there is almost a complete absence of references to biblical scholarship). His various interlocutors include philosophical naturalists, deists, those insensitive to modern ecological and racial injustice, and Christians whose eschatology resembles escapology. The intended audience was not always clear.

This Sacred Life has several limitations.

First, Wirzba repeatedly speaks critically and prophetically to the American context with its historical mistreatment and abuse of non-white peoples. No attempt is made to relate this to a global audience.

Second, those otherwise sympathetic to Wirzba's basic argument could be put off by its resemblance to theologies that readers of this journal, along with mainstream theological orthodoxy, would find problematic. In showing the close relatedness of the Creator to his creation the book sometimes sounded panentheistic. For example: "For God to depart from creation altogether would entail something like a departing from God's own self." (151) Or, suggesting human attitude toward the soil should be one of "humility and reverence before it." (68) In context these remarks make sense, but it would not have been hard to qualify such comments, or as Kärkkäinen does (*Creation and Humanity*, 2015), seek to rehabilitate panentheistic language. Similarly, in arguing for the intrinsic relatedness of all creatures, and preferring verbs over nouns to describe reality as it actually is, Wirzba's writing resembles process theology. Yet there is no dialogue with process thought, affirmingly or critically.

The great strength of this work is to give scientific, philosophical, and sapiential insight into God's remarkable creation. As a lifelong city-dweller reading this work was genuinely eye-opening to the wonder of creation, and thus, of its Creator. The rootedness and meshwork imagery were enriching and helpful correctives of my native Western outlook on creaturely life. Similarly, his criticism of well-known concepts through which people interpret life, such as GPS, were astute. Though Wirzba's lack of interaction with pneumatological approaches to creation (such as Amos Yong's *The Spirit of Creation* [2011]), is a missed opportunity, readers can draw this work into a complementary dialogue with such Pentecostal approaches.

Wirzba achieves his goal of arguing for life's sacredness by explaining the interrelation between people and place and ethics. His approach enriches and complements a more biblical-theological account. Thus, his book is to be commended for providing to readers a reverential doctrine of creation.

Adam Dodds

Alphacrucis University College, Brisbane, QLD, Australia