

CREATURES



RADICAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AFTER LAUDATO SI'
Discovering the intrinsic Value of all Creatures, Human & Non-human

Could Eating other Creatures be a Way of Discovering their Intrinsic Value?¹

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In this contribution I will put an affirmation of the intrinsic value of other living creatures to the test. How could one eat such creatures *and* affirm their intrinsic value? This dilemma will be unpacked through critical reflection on each of the key terms in the conference theme with the addition of two others, namely “eating” and “way”, while the “all” in “all creatures” is tested for its inclusivity.

A Multi-layered Dilemma

Intuitively, eating another form of life may serve as a prime example of treating that form of life in terms of its instrumental value (for sustenance) and not its intrinsic value. This applies whether that form of life is animal, vegetable, fruit, nuts, seeds, grass or organic residues. It also applies whether the eater is human, animal, insect or plant. Admittedly, plants (except for carnivorous plants) do not “eat”; they have the ability to absorb minerals from the soil and to produce organic material through photosynthesis. Whenever organisms other than plants eat, they eat organic material. They have several options here: eating them alive, killing them first, relying on other members of the species (or other species) to do the killing, waiting for them to die first or waiting for the organism to become decomposed.

This rudimentary observation poses an intriguing dilemma for any attempt to “discover the intrinsic value of all creatures” and to call for “radical ecological conversion”. There are multiple layers of this dilemma that need to be unpacked.

Firstly, there seem to be limits as to how far one can go in recognising the intrinsic value of *other* creatures; at some point one has to eat. Would it not be hypocritical to call for such recognition in some areas (animal cruelty), while continuing to treat other creatures in terms of their instrumental value in other areas (eating food)? Is there a way out of this dilemma?

Secondly, it should be noted that a vegetarian argument would not by itself resolve the problem. Most human forms of eating (and this applies to mammals, reptiles, birds, fish and insects too) require the (prior) death of other organisms. This may be regarded as one

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definition of *eating*, namely where one metabolism absorbs (swallows, chews, digest and absorb) another so that the latter no longer exists as a metabolism. The transaction hardly takes place through mutual consent. Admittedly, eating does not necessarily imply killing other organisms. Killing is required for eating meat or fish, except in cases on eating carrion. It is also required for many form of vegetables (carrots, cabbages, potatoes). Admittedly, it may be odd to use the word “kill” to describe uprooting plants but it is indeed possible for one species (mostly humans) to end the life of another in this way. Killing is not required for eating fruit, pods, nuts and seeds. Although one may “kill” the potential of seeds to become living entities, eating fruit may actually help to distribute such seeds. Killing is not required for eating dead grass, but humans don’t eat that often. Picking leaves from plants (spinach, herbs) need not kill the plant and may actually stimulate plant growth, but the leaves as part of a living organism are still “amputated” prematurely. Killing other organisms is also not required in the cases of milk (yoghurt and cheese), eggs or honey, but in these cases some “stealing” is arguably required. Such eating presumably takes place without the consent of those who produced such food.

Thirdly, it is indeed possible to find an instinctive way out of this dilemma by introducing a hierarchy amongst forms of life. Accordingly, the intrinsic value of other animals needs to be recognised (thus prohibiting eating mammals, birds or fish), while plants could be regarded as having lesser intrinsic value. This is the standard argument for vegetarian and vegan diets, i.e. to reduce the “violence” against other forms of life. To recognise the intrinsic value of *all* creatures does not require the recognition of their *equal* intrinsic value.² One may then suggest that mammals have more intrinsic value than let us say reptiles and birds, while reptiles have more intrinsic value than insects, insects more than plants (also trees?), etc. Evidently such hierarchies are at play in moral arguments that one may eat chickens but not (human) children), or chick peas but not chickens.

To introduce such a hierarchy creates other problems though – and not only in terms of biological classification. The obvious problem is that such a hierarchy seems to undermine the very distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value. It also allows a form of anthropocentrism in via the back door. Could one then suggest that great apes have more intrinsic value than other mammals and humans more intrinsic value than other hominids and hominins? What prevents one then from arguing that there are also different levels of intrinsic value amongst humans? What about equal human dignity and equality before the law? Note that humans are indeed treated in terms of their different instrumental values to the company – with salaries to match that.

Fourthly, such a way out of the dilemma raises further questions about the criteria introduced to differentiate between levels of intrinsic value. What criteria *could* be considered? There are proposals for value richness and this debate may well be necessary, but such criteria typically remain anthropomorphic if not anthropocentric and androcentric. Sentience, the ability to experience pain and suffering, consciousness, self-consciousness, symbolic consciousness, or intelligence is privileged – instead of an ability to swim (as dolphins may wish to suggest), to run (cheetahs), to climb trees (squirrels), to see (eagles), to fly (swallows), to maintain social cohesion (bees, ants) or to produce food (grass).³ Again such criteria open the door for further

² In speaking of a “universal communion” *Laudato Si’* hints in this direction: “This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails” (par 90).

³ Such a hierarchy of values “carried” by nature is proposed by Holmes Rolston III. This is counter-balanced by a distinction between intrinsic, instrumental value and systemic value. Grass has more systemic value than those who eat grass, while humans may have more intrinsic value than those creatures that eat grass. See his *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), also *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–53.

elaboration, such as being educated, being “civilised”, being eloquent, fluency in English, and so forth, not to mention bodily beauty, strength, ball-skills, social status or bank balance. Again the question is whether there is some flaw in these observations that would allow a way out of the dilemma.

Fifthly, some may begin to wonder whether the (Kantian) distinction between *intrinsic* and instrumental value really holds. One may add the need to recognise “inherent” value – to make room for works of art, letters, a last will and testament, constitutions and contracts that would not have intrinsic value but could not be reduced to their instrumental value (for their owners) either. Recall that one may treat other human beings in terms of their instrumental value (whenever we employ others on the basis of mutual consent), but to treat others in terms of their instrumental value *only*, amounts to a definition of slavery. Alternatively, one may seek to extend intrinsic value not only to other animals but also to non-sentient beings. This prompts famous controversies over whether trees have (moral) standing and whether rocks have rights. Is there no need to recognise how all forms of life rely on life-giving water and minerals, that every stone is precious, that the “deaths” (a misnomer!) of stars were necessary to “give birth” to planets, not to mention a living planet (Gaia). In considering “all creatures” it would not do to privilege living creatures only since life depends on non-living entities.

At this point it would become necessary, at least for humans to insist that recognising (or discovering) intrinsic value cannot imply equal intrinsic value – or else one may scarcely walk across the grass for fear of killing millions of micro-organisms in the process. If so, it seems that we cannot do without some distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value, troublesome as this may be. The question is where one draws the line between intrinsic and instrumental value. We may frown upon those who include only adult, propertied, male citizens, while vegans may critique those who fail to include everything with eyes, but don’t we all have to draw a line somewhere? The vegetarian position rightly acknowledges the moral relevance of the ability to suffer – and hence the difference between eating rabbits and carrots. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this is the only valid point of demarcation. What about the reliance of sentient forms of life on other organisms and of all forms of life on micro-organisms? What about the role of non-living entities? Do they not have intrinsic value too?

In the sixth place, it may also be appropriate to raise questions about the term “*value*” – as one moral concept alongside others such as moral visions, moral purposes, moral virtues and moral duties. This is a point of controversy in rivalling ethical theories, especially of Western origin. There is a need for rules and for goals and to reduce the one to the other is dangerous. The term “value” is arguably already anthropocentric in that it indicates what we regard as valuable – and that could include water, money, art, education, friendship and so forth. The limits of the term “value” are indicated by an unwillingness to reduce children to their value – whether instrumental or intrinsic. One may value God’s patience but to “value” God is hardly the appropriate term. The recognition of a sense of relatedness, of communion, of belonging to some larger whole cannot be reduced to its value for the one who does the valuing precisely because that seems to privilege the relata over the relationship. Does this give us some clue for a way out of the dilemma?

Finally, one may wish to question the assumption that eating something is *not compatible* with recognising or discovering its intrinsic value. This would indeed be counter-intuitive since it seems that to eat something is the prime example of treating that thing in terms of its instrumental value. The question is then worth repeating: Could eating other creatures be a way of discovering their intrinsic value?

Eating: A typology

In a recent contribution I offered a typology of what we (humans) do when we eat.⁴ This was developed in the context of a project on “Food contestation” situated in a multi-disciplinary Centre of Excellence on Food Security located at the University of the Western Cape where I am based. The question is not only what those who are well-nourished do when they eat, but whether that applies in the context of food insecurity. This may serve as a test case, as long as one remembers that eating is not the prerogative of the well-nourished. The poor are not only poor because they are also people with ordinary desires, dreams and delusions. Likewise, the hungry are not defined by their hunger only.

Let me highlight only the headings of the typology and a one sentence description in each case, noting that these include secular as well as theological views:

- *Food as fuel*: This crudely Darwinian position would situate eating in the context of an ongoing struggle for survival. We must eat in order to live. And the God of life then?
- *Eating as a demonstration of human (or male or white) supremacy*: On the basis of cooking human eating epitomises and symbolises human power and indeed supremacy at the proverbial top of the food chain (although earlier hominids were cat-food).
- *The ascetic vision*: Attempts (only amongst humans?) to minimize or at least lessen the use of force entailed in eating cannot avoid such force completely, at least not amongst other species.
- *Hedonistic consumption*: A variant of a (social) Darwinian view on eating except that it focuses on pleasure rather than on inducing or avoiding pain
- *Conspicuous consumption*: Through the act of consuming food and the cultural practices surrounding that, people convey their social status in comparison with the consumption patterns of their neighbours.
- *Eating as recycling*: Predation, killing other organisms for food, absorbing other metabolisms is not merely condoned or eschewed but praised as an integral part of a world that includes living creatures. In ecosystems nothing that lives is ever wasted but becomes recycled through the role of bacteria, fungi and worms. To eat is to participate in God’s gift of life as long as one does not eschew being eaten in the end.
- *Providing food for others through kenotic love*: To establish and sustain relationships requires giving and receiving. The legitimation of the use of force embedded in predation entails a one-sided reading of evolutionary history. Providing food for others is a form of care. Becoming food for others by dying well entails a gift of self-relinquishment.
- *Eating as superfluous joy*: Eating cannot be reduced to hedonistic experiences of pleasure or consumerist over-indulgence; it can be joyful only if the availability of food is precisely not taken for granted and the costs are factored in. The sheer pulsating joy of eating and drinking, of life in all its vulnerability, involves “an immersion in plenitude and sharing”⁵ in the gift of life.

The positions sketched above all remain unsatisfactory in one way or another in terms of considerations that include the scientific (traction with evolutionary history), the ecological (the rootedness of human eating in ecosystems, disallowing sharp divides between humans and other primates, between sentient animals and other forms of life, or between what is organic and what is inorganic), the cultural (avoiding reductionist accounts of human eating

⁴ See “What Do We Do When We Eat? Part 1: An Inconclusive Inquiry”, *Scriptura* 115, 1–17 and “What Do We Do When We Eat? Part 2: A Theological Inquiry”, *Scriptura* 115, 1–21.

⁵ See Angel F. Méndez-Montoya, *Theology and Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 154.

merely in terms of a struggle for survival), the ethical (attending to anthropocentrism, speciesism, elitism, classism, sexism, racism amidst food insecurity) and the theological (doing justice to the soteriological focus and Trinitarian width of the Christian faith).

One may nevertheless be able to detect elements of wisdom in each of the types sketched above. Only one approach would not suffice. Typically, we are inclined to give a diverging range of answers to the question why we are eating whatever we are eating. The types sketched above are clearly in conflict with each other so that an eclectic approach will not do either – even though we may have to rely on such eclecticism to cope in everyday decisions. The danger of eclectic approaches is that the particularity of a context may provide an easy way out to legitimise eating practices that violate other (human) creatures.

It should be clear that food insecurity tends to aggravate the debate since each of the types gain a distinct set of connotations when situated either in a context of relative abundance or of deprivation. The production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food is distorted by structural violence, what Christians would re-describe as the power of sin, prompting ethical debates on starvation, hunger, stunting, obesity, and an unsustainable food economy.⁶ However, such debates cannot avoid assumptions about eating and especially on the necessity of predation, exacerbating such distortions. For example: if food is a matter of fuel for survival, then the hungry may be deemed to be evolutionary failures. If food is a matter of hedonistic pleasure, then the hungry are constantly reminded that they are denied what the elite may treasure. In the case of conspicuous consumption the hungry are conspicuously absent. By contrast, if an ascetic ideal is pushed, the poor may well wonder how this applies to them.

Finding the Way?

Could eating other creatures be a way of recognising or discovering their intrinsic value? Christians as people of the *Way* may well believe that they have embedded in their tradition a way of responding to this question. In the biblical roots of the Christian tradition there is quite a bit of food-talk. Recall the tree of life and of knowledge of good and evil in paradise, the food regulations in Genesis 1, the food concessions in Genesis 9, the Passover lamb, the provision of manna in the desert, the many regulations around clean and unclean food in the Torah, the prescription of grain and meat sacrifices, the notorious feasts that Jesus had with sinners to symbolise their inclusion in God's household, Jesus being portrayed as the bread of life, the role of fish in the post-Easter witnesses, the symbols of bread and wine in Eucharistic eating and the eschatological images of the lion and the lamb in the peaceable kingdom.

Within the last decade or so a significant corpus of theological literature on eating emerged.⁷

⁶ For an analysis of sin-talk in *Laudato Si'*, see Ernst M. Conradie, "Laudato Si' and the Root Causes of Ecological Destruction", in Andrew Warmback (ed), "A Review Article on Laudato Si'", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 157, 135-171 (138-145).

⁷ I have found the following book-length contributions helpful: Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013); Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*. New York: Pocket Books, 1970) and *Food for Thought: Resurrecting the Art of Eating* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); David Grumett & Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Ascetism, Meat and the Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010); David Grumett & Rachel Muers (eds.), *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (New York: T.&T. Clark, 2012); Shannon Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); Leon R. Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013); Angel F. Méndez-Montoya, *Theology and Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Marthinus Versfeld, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher's Cookbook* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983). Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origin, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners* (Toronto: HarperCollins. 1992); Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating: The Christian Practice*

Does this enable us to find a way out of the dilemma? Such literature is surely to be welcomed. Nevertheless, let me state what I take to be the bottom-line for discourse on “radical ecological conversion”, namely the underlying need to address the problem of predation.⁸ There is a temptation to use the word “*ecological*” in the sense of a harmonious equilibrium of forms of life in an ecosystem, without reference to the role of predation.⁹ One does not need to adopt controversial phrases such as “the survival of the fittest” or “nature red in tooth and claw” to recognise that one cannot merely emphasise what seems likeable in evolutionary theory or in ecosystems only to discard those elements that seem less palatable.¹⁰ Predation also forms a test for the notion of “integral ecology” (where the place of humans is respected as part of ecosystems – par. 137) that is proposed in *Laudato Si’*. How does one make sense of the ecological role of predation when “taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation” (par. 225)?

Confronting the problem of predation raises the question how the “radical” in “radical ecological conversion” should be understood. The ascetic vision would point in the direction of using less violence given a discovery of the intrinsic value of other creatures. The question is how one could eat any other creatures if they, too, are beloved by God. One could call for a “solidarity of the sixth day” in order to insist that we humans form part of God’s creation. However, how *radical* should one then be? Should one only (or at least) avoid eating meat? And fish? Should one eat less and less (as some desert fathers and mothers demonstrated)? Should one give one’s body as food for others, sooner rather than later? Should one encourage other non-human predators to follow this example (and see predation as the result of a cosmic fall)? There is the old joke of the farmer who trained his donkey to get along on less and less food. Just when the donkey got used to that, it died. Should one adopt vegan practices in proleptic anticipation of an eschatological “peace on earth” that includes a peace between species? Should we hope for a coming dispensation where eating will be no more? Should we confess our sins whenever we eat anything but seeds and fruit? If we call for such kenotic eating practices amongst humans, how should predation amongst other creatures then be interpreted? What about our evolutionary continuity with other living creatures? The irony seems to be that humanising nature in this way (by avoiding violence) tends to resist the role of predation in ecosystems and then runs counter to attempts to respect the intrinsic value of such creatures.

Is such a radical vision plausible? Is it ecological? Does this not suggest an unwillingness to accept being created on the Creator’s terms? Does this not indicate a Manichaean disdain for what is material, bodily and earthly? Does this not introduce a tension between God’s work of creation and salvation?¹¹ Indeed, what does being a *creature* really mean and could we speak on behalf of “all creatures” once we recognise the danger of reconstructing what it is that God

of Everyday Life (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001); Loren Wilkinson, “A Christian Ecology of Death: Biblical Imagery and the ‘Ecological Crisis’”, 1975 Faculty lecture, Seattle Pacific College; and Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see my “Eat and/or be Eaten: The Evolutionary Roots of Violence?” *Scriptura* 114 (2015), 1–22; and especially *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

⁹ See the section on the “harmony of creation” in *Laudato Si’* (par. 84–88). It quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other”. It speaks of the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature that became conflictual (par 66). Does such harmony include or eschew the role of predation?

¹⁰ Lisa Sideris argues that eminent ecofeminist scholars often fail to recognise the fierce battle for survival in evolutionary history. See her *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 45–90.

¹¹ I have explored this problem at some length in various publications, especially in *The Earth in God’s Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015).

created “in the beginning”?¹²

The danger is that a failure to address such hard questions could revert, in daily Christian practices, to the opposite, namely an equally radical theological legitimation of the struggle for survival. Accordingly, predation is precisely that which is deemed to be so “very good” in God’s creation! This would suggest that God is on the side of strong after all. God’s election then follows the pattern of natural selection. Nietzsche may be more satisfied with such a god but this is clearly not compatible with numerous contemporary theological movements, including liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, Dalit theology, Minjung theology and a range of indigenous theologies. On this point Christians may need to insist that they are people of *the* Way and not just *a* way or any way.

One could of course also decide to drop the “radical” and opt for the Aristotelian middle way. There may well be some practical wisdom here but this would also admit to a theological failure to come to terms with the underlying problem of predation. Again, the question remains: Could eating other creatures be a way of recognising or discovering their intrinsic value?

Recognising / Discovering / Participating in Intrinsic Value

There may be another way out of the dilemma which requires one to bracket the term “*discover*” in the conference title. The clue here is that the recognition of intrinsic value is arguably something that only humans (maybe also the angels?) are capable of. Other animals may “discover” food and this may excite them wildly (illustrated by pets); they may store food and even hide that away from others, but the discovery of intrinsic worth seems to be restricted to humans only. What if the verb is changed and replaced by something like participating in what is of intrinsic worth? Could this offer a way out? My sense is that this is worth exploring but also that this may call for radical conversion of a different kind.

One may regard eating as an interaction between two metabolisms.¹³ From this narrower perspective eating poses intractable problems. I really do not welcome mosquitoes or ticks sucking my blood. However, once eating is viewed through a wider lens than the needs of a single metabolism, it seems to pose fewer problems.¹⁴ Accordingly, eating may indeed be regarded as a form of recycling. Predation, killing other organisms for food, absorbing other metabolisms is then not merely condoned or eschewed but praised as an integral part of a world that includes living creatures. In ecosystems nothing that lives is ever wasted but becomes recycled through the role of bacteria, fungi and worms.¹⁵ The danger is of course

¹² I argued elsewhere that it cannot be taken for granted that we know what God created, not least because we were not there “in the beginning”, while what we find around us is deeply contaminated by human sin. Instead, from amidst the current dispensation, plagued as it is by pain, suffering, anxiety, death, injustice, oppression, and ecological destruction, it is deeply counter-intuitive to confess that this world is God’s creation, that *this* God of love is the ultimate origin of *this* world, that *this* is God’s beloved world. To focus only on what one may regard as good, beautiful and harmonious and to portray that as God’s creation is to fail to confront problems associated with death, extinction, earthquakes, tsunamis, predation, and violent conflict. In the human sphere one may insist that injustice and oppression is not God’s creation by introducing a crucial distinction between creation and fall. However, this distinction raises other hard theological problems in the light of evolutionary history. See my article “What on Earth did God Create? Overtures to an Ecumenical Theology of Creation”, *The Ecumenical Review* 66:4 (2014), 433-453.

¹³ For this emphasis on metabolisms, see the perceptive phenomenological analysis of Hans Jonas in *The Phenomenology of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966)

¹⁴ *Laudato Si’* hints in this direction although it does not extend this to the way in which organisms eat each other: “Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system. Although we are often not aware of it, we depend on these larger systems for our own existence” (par. 140).

¹⁵ In a critique of industrial waste production, *Laudato Si’* praises such recycling as exemplary: “the way natural ecosystems work is exemplary: plants synthesize nutrients which feed herbivores; these in turn

that such a position can easily be used to legitimise human brutality against other animals and the plight of animals in commercial agriculture.

This rather crudely secular perspective is open to theological interpretation though. Acts of eating and being eaten may be regarded as precisely that which a benevolent God declared to be “good” about finite creatures. As Loren Wilkinson observes, “It has not been given humanity the choice to eat without killing, nor has that choice been given to any living thing. But man can eat with wonder and love, recognizing his place in the household of life.”¹⁶ Flesh is the thing that God loves.¹⁷ Here there is no Gnostic or Manichaean disdain for blood, guts, saliva, orgasm or excretion. There is a recognition of the need to make sacrifices but this is for the sake of the feast. The South African Augustinian philosopher Marthinus Versfeld speaks of the “incredible largesse emptied upon the earth, which is itself superfluous”.¹⁸ Augustine was wrong in making a distinction between using things and reserving joy only for God. It is through enjoying food that we glorify the Creator. To taste food is to taste God.¹⁹ The whole world is offered by its maker as a divine banquet, a cosmic feast. The pulse invigorating Robert Farrar Capon’s writings on eating is that food is simply delicious and should not be reduced to what is useful or valuable (nutritious). He regards the preference for meaning over matter to be idolatrous.²⁰ All that is alive lives by eating. To eat is to participate in God’s gift of life.²¹ Eating is then not a form of enmity but of intimacy. When we eat, Angel Méndez-Montoya observes, “we are literally ‘intimate’ with food by physically bringing it near to the body, lips and mouth ... Our bodies are literally food transformed into flesh, tendon, blood, and bone”.²² Our mouths have multiple and competing functions – chewing, tasting, speaking, kissing – but they remain integrally related to each other. By eating we consume the world around us and are nourished by it, but this also expresses a sense of communion with the world that eliminates rigid boundaries between interiority and exteriority.²³ This suggests the need to undermine binary oppositions regarding eating – as if the absorption of food can be classified in terms of enmity and intimacy, what is inside and what is outside.

Given such observations, for humans to participate in this gift is to appreciate its intrinsic worth. Such an emphasis on participation could draw on the sense of interrelatedness and interdependence *Laudato Si*,²⁴ on an Orthodox understanding of being as communion,²⁵ indeed on the participation of all creatures in the triune communion, on an African

become food for carnivores, which produce significant quantities of organic waste which give rise to new generations of plants” (par. 22).

¹⁶ Wilkinson, “A Christian Ecology of Death”, 23.

¹⁷ Wirzba, *Food & Faith*, 218.

¹⁸ Versfeld, *Food for Thought*, 150.

¹⁹ Versfeld puts this unashamedly: “The good life, then, is ... where the water or wine we drink ... has not lost its corporeality because it is the eternal drink which will take away all thirst. Hence we talk of *tasting* life, of *tasting* God, the gustation of God, when our flesh and blood call for the Living God – our flesh and blood, not a meagre spiritual ego born of desire and abstraction and attempting to nourish itself on the thin soup of success.” See his *Food for Thought*, 33.

²⁰ Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*, 117.

²¹ See Méndez-Montoya, *Theology and Food*, 86, drawing on insights from Alexander Schmemmann.

²² Méndez-Montoya, *Theology and Food*, 1.

²³ See Méndez-Montoya, *Theology and Food*, 94.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Encyclical Letter) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015). Paragraph 89 states: “as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect”.

²⁵ See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).

understanding of ubuntu (a common humanity),²⁶ or the intuition in deep ecology of being part of a larger Self alike. However, romantic interpretations of such communion are no longer possible. The communion may indeed be holy but it does not eschew death and being eaten.

To conclude

Does one opt for a narrower or a wider lens then? There are dangers on both side – the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and treating one case study as indicative of general patters. This tension is also prevalent between two conflicting approaches to environmental ethics, namely a biocentric approach and an ecocentric approach. The debate between such approaches – and others – can hardly be resolved here. It may at least be possible to sketch an agenda for further theological thinking in this regard.

As I have argued elsewhere, nothing short of a fully Trinitarian Way would suffice.²⁷ There is a need for a theocentric focus on the love and the joy of the Creator, for a kenotic Christological concentration and a Pneumatological orientation on the Giver of (new) Life. What is needed is a theology that accepts the gift of life on God's terms, one that brings into play the full spectrum of Christological symbols (incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, session and parousia) and one that does justice to the structural differences between Christology and Pneumatology.²⁸ However, calling for such a Trinitarian theology is far easier than offering one.²⁹ It remains rather elusive given the tendency to play the one off against the other. Does the Son need to correct the botched job of the Father who is responsible for predation? Does the Spirit share in the joy of eating (at the Father's table) or is this joy, well, purely spiritual? Does the Spirit need to bring such joy through or independent of the kenosis of the Son? It will not do to take short cuts to an inner-Trinitarian mysticism in order to emphasise a harmony of relationships – precisely because this is tested through a theological interpretation of predation.³⁰ Eucharistic short cuts will not do here either, even though this meal may serve as an appropriate lens to comprehend the complexity embedded in the most ordinary, daily act of eating. Both bread and wine require human ingenuity but relies of fruits and seeds only and thus symbolises the need to reduce (but not eliminate) violence.

To participate in the intrinsic worth of the Gift of Life would indeed require from Christians radical **conversion**, namely to live from their own deepest confession, to not only confess their belief, but also to believe their confession. I believe that such conversion would also be radically ecological, so that “the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them”.³¹ Through the eyes of those outside the Christian tradition the plausibility of such faith will be tested by an environmental ethos,

²⁶ This is a core theme in the ministry of Desmond Mphilo Tutu. See, for example, his *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

²⁷ See Ernst M. Conradie, “Only a Fully Trinitarian Theology will Do, but where Can that be Found?” *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 54:1&2 (2013), 1–9.

²⁸ See Arnold van Ruler's remarkable essay entitled “Structural Differences between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives” in *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays towards a Public Theology*, edited by John Bolt (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 27–46.

²⁹ See Arnold van Ruler's equally remarkable essay entitled “The Necessity of a Trinitarian Theology” in *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, 1–26.

³⁰ I am not convinced that *Laudato Si'* escapes this danger when it states that “Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships” (par. 240). To add that, “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” is indeed appropriate, but such connectedness involves creatures eating each other.

³¹ *Laudatio Si'*, par. 217.

praxis and spirituality.³² Through the eyes of other forms of life (those that do have eyes) the test will be what we do whenever we eat them.

³² I have argued elsewhere that Christian ecotheology may be regarded as a twofold critique, namely a Christian critique of environmental destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity (which is structurally similar to the Christian critique of patriarchy and a feminist critique of Christianity in feminist theology). There are voices within the field that allow one of these two critiques to dominate – so that ecotheology either becomes purely apologetic or reduced to and eventually replaced by discourse on religion and ecology. The genius of ecotheology may well lie in its ability to maintain a creative tension between such a twofold critique. See my article “Contemporary Challenges to Christian ecotheology: Some Reflections on the State of the Debate after Five Decades”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 147 (2013), 106–123.