

*Friday Symposium
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*Facing East: The Eastern Orthodox Worldview of Alexander Schmemmann-
Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Sacramental Perspective*
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Eureka! I thought it was the theological discovery of the decade. Or maybe even the century, or the millennium. Maybe in all of Church history. The revelation came early on a Sunday morning in the Spring of 1984 at about 7: 30 in the morning as I was hastily trying to finish up my preparation for a Sunday School lesson that I was scheduled to teach in just two short hours. I had recently taken a course in the doctoral program at Dallas Theological Seminary under Dr. Lanier Burns on the theology of the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy). Under this influence, I decided that a study of some of the important themes I had learned in that class would be good material for some forty to sixty college students that I was teaching that semester on Sunday mornings. Dr. Burns had mentioned in class one day that some biblical theologians took Genesis 1: 26-28, the creation decree, as the theme of the Bible.¹ That idea registered with me deeply. So the first topic I covered in our college class was the doctrine of creation based on the meaning and importance of this newly discovered text. The next logical step in my study was to move on from the creation story in Genesis 1-2 to the fall of humanity into sin. So I spent a couple of Sundays focusing on Genesis 3 where the narrative of the tragic loss of paradise is recounted. I referred to the fall as the

¹ Gen. 1:26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." Gen. 1:27 And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Gen. 1:28 And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

“uncreation” in an attempt to suggest that it amounts to an undoing or reversal of God’s creational norms and intentions. In our study of these three chapters, then, I had emphasized both “creation”—God’s original purposes for humanity and the earth, and the “uncreation”—the corruption of those purposes by our sin and rebellion.

But now, at 7: 30 A.M., one-hundred and twenty minutes before my class was to begin, I was in a deep quandary. Where do I go from here? I had told the students about creation and uncreation, but now what? Maybe I should move on to a study of Noah, or the tower of Babel, or Abraham. But then, in a flash of insight, the phrase occurred to me: “new creation.” First there was the creation. Yes. Then uncreation. That made good biblical sense. Next in line had to be new creation! That was it. That was the next step. That was the third and missing piece in my up-to-that-point two-part formula. That would be my lesson in Sunday School that very morning. After all, believers are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5: 17). In Galatians 6: 15 Paul said that neither circumcision or uncircumcision was anything, but what was really important was new creation. Right then and there I made what I thought was the theological discovery of the decade, or the century, or millennium, or of Church history itself. Here is the revolutionary thought that occurred to me: that redemption in Jesus Christ as *new creation* meant a *recovery, renewal, or restoration* of God’s original purposes in *creation* that had been spoiled by *uncreation* or sin. The experience of grace in the gospel meant that the ravaging effects of sin on God’s cosmic intentions and creation purposes were restored in Jesus Christ who had inaugurated and would consummate salvation as new creation. Christianity, in other words, has to do with a the salvaging of a sin-wrecked world.²

² Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 11.

Visions of theological grandeur began to dance in my head. I had discovered something that no one else had ever thought of before. After all, I had been a believer for about fourteen years, read countless Christian books, been in multiple ministries and churches, and had earned a 125 hour master of theology degree. But in all this I had never seen or heard of the biblical formula of “creation, uncreation, new creation” as a way of explaining the overall story of the Scriptures and the biblical worldview! I would be famous! Rich! I would write books and speak at conferences enlightening others about this most phenomenal theological revelation!

My bubble, however, soon would burst. Later that same year, I came across a new book by Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton titled *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (InterVarsity Press, 1984). The first thing I saw in the table of contents were two chapters explaining what worldviews were. Then to my amazement, there it was, my discovery, already in print. Lo and behold if chapter three wasn't on creation, chapter four on the fall, and chapter five on redemption. I was happy and sad simultaneously—happy that others out there confirmed my new understanding, but sad that they had beat me to it in print. Then, to my even deeper amazement, the next year I came across Albert Wolters' book *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Eerdmans, 1985). Guess what the table of contents of this book contained? Correct! Chapter one was on “What is a Worldview?” Chapters two, three and four were on creation, fall, and redemption respectively. I devoured both of these books, learning more from them than I can even say.

Looking back on the experience, I realized that I was undergoing a major theological paradigm shift. It seemed that the notion of worldview and the themes of creation, uncreation/fall, new creation/redemption were popping up everywhere. I discovered that John Calvin's greatest work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, had a CFR structure. I learned that these three concepts were at the heart of reformed theol

ogy, and a movement called neo-Calvinism. I began to see the same pattern everywhere in Scripture, as the structure of the book of Romans, for example, and as the outline of the work of Christ in Colossians as the cosmic Creator (1: 16-17) and Redeemer (1: 18-23). Then a good friend of mine casually suggested that I read a book he had just discovered called *For the Life of the World* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963) written by the Orthodox theologian, Father Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983). I was a bit skeptical at first. Eastern Orthodoxy was certainly “unknown territory” to me. My Protestant orientation didn't help matters much either. But at my friend's insistence, I began to read the book only to learn that the Orthodox had also made “my” discovery long before I did. As I read in the Preface to the work, Schmemmann's goal was, as he put it, “to outline . . . the ‘Christian worldview,’ i.e., the approach to the world and to man's life in it that stems from the liturgical experience of the Orthodox Church.”³ And then as I turned to the first chapter, there they were again, my three friends—creation, fall, and redemption—this time in Orthodox, sacramental dress. As I continued on, I became deeply impressed with Schmemmann's work. In it I encountered one of the most theologically profound and spiritually enriching interpretations of the Christian faith that I had ever come across, and I have not been the same since.

So in the short span of a couple of years, I made discoveries that for me were truly revolutionary. I learned that the overall biblical outline consists of the three basic themes of creation, fall, and redemption, recognizing that the third theme has to do with the reclamation of the first in light of the effects of the second. And, with the help of Alexander Schmemmann, I learned how to understand these three notions in a profoundly sacramental way. In the time that remains, what I would like to do is to sketch for you some of the highlights of the Eastern Orthodox worldview of Alexander Schmemmann as

³ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 7.

he presents his sacramental understanding of the transforming biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption.

Schmemmann begins his book on a note of urgency. Secularism, he says, has resulted in the progressive alienation of our culture from its very roots in the Christian theology and experience. This deep secularism has divided Christians as well, some welcoming it as the best fruit of Christianity in history, others favoring a Manichean rejection of the secular world and an escape into a disincarnate and dualistic spirituality. Either response, he says, is contrary to the wholeness and catholicity of the genuine Orthodox tradition which emphasizes these three familiar things: (1) the goodness of the created world, (2) the wickedness in which the created world lies, and (3) the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, who gave His life for the life of the created world.⁴ The trick, Schmemmann says, is to figure out how to hold these three seemingly contradictory affirmations together in faith, life, and practice, and overcome the temptation to “absolutize” any one of them.⁵ The way to go about this, according to Schmemmann, is not by means of crafting neat intellectual or theological theories (as we in the Greco-Roman West would do),⁶ but rather to draw on the living and unbroken experience of the Orthodox Church and her liturgy in which the meaning of these three themes are re

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ To absolutize creation apart from God would lead to secularism; to absolutize the world’s wickedness would lead to Gnosticism and Manicheanism; to absolutize redemption apart from creation would lead to some kind of disembodied, docetic superspirituality (called angelism in the medieval period).

⁶ Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim’s Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), makes this contrast between Eastern and Western Christianity. Western Christianity is more about ideas than about heart-driven living faith, more what you think than what you do. . . . The Orthodox Church, escaping this sort of discord, could admire a butterfly without having to pin its head to a board. . . . It’s not yet perfection on earth, but there is to a refugee Westerner a certain bliss in bypassing theological arm-wrestling about things too big for our puny understanding.”

vealed and brought into unity. For Schmemmann, the Orthodox understanding of the essentials of the Christian worldview is a way of offsetting the baneful effects of secularism, and generating a recovery of a sacramental understanding and experience of the world.

Schmemmann begins by focusing on the seemingly secondary theme of food. He quotes the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach who said that “man is what he eats.” By this quip, Feuerbach attempted to convey the idea that human beings are nothing but biological, physical creatures, the exclusive products of their diets. In point of fact, however, Schmemmann says he hit upon the most religious idea of man. In the biblical story of creation, man is presented first of all as a hungry being, and the whole world is set before him as his food. Second only to the command to propagate and have dominion over creation is the command to eat of the earth (Gen. 1: 29). Schmemmann explains this point in these comments.

Man must eat in order to live; he must take the [products of the] world into his body and transform it [through digestion and absorption] into himself, into flesh and blood. He is indeed that which he eats, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table for man. And this image of the banquet remains, throughout the whole Bible, the central image of life. It is the image of life at its creation and also the image of life at its end and fulfillment: “. . . that you eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom.”⁷

⁷ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 11. Here is a sampling of biblical texts that confirm Schmemmann’s assertion about the omnipresence of the theme of food in the Bible.

Deut. 14:23 "And you shall eat in the presence of the \Lord\ your God, at the place where He chooses to establish His name, the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your oil, and the first-born of your herd and your flock, in order that you may learn to fear the \Lord\ your God always.

Is. 25:6 ¶ And the \Lord\ of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, {And} refined, aged wine. Is. 25:7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. Is. 25:8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord \God\ will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the \Lord\ has

As Schmemmann goes on to say, he begins with this secondary theme of food because he wants to answer one basic question:

Of what life do we speak, what life do we preach, proclaim and announce when, as Christians, we confess that Christ died *for the life of the world* [John 6: 51]? What *life* is both motivation, and the beginning and the goal of Christian mission?⁸

In John 6:51, Jesus uses food metaphors to describe Himself and the ultimate purposes of His ministry. He said: "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give *for the LIFE of the world* is My flesh." What is the nature of this *LIFE—the LIFE of the world*—for which Christ gave His flesh? In John 10: 10, Jesus said that He came that we might have *LIFE* and have it more abundantly. What is this *LIFE* that we are to have in abundance? That is the question that Schmemmann seeks to answer, and he says that two basic responses are typically given.

spoken. Is. 25:9 And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the \Lord\ for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."

Matt. 11:19 "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Matt. 26:26 ¶ And while they were eating, Jesus took {some} bread, and after a blessing, He broke {it} and gave {it} to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Matt. 26:27 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave {it} to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; Matt. 26:28 for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. Matt. 26:29 "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

Rev. 19:7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." Rev. 19:8 And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright {and} clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Rev. 19:9 And he *said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he *said to me, "These are true words of God."

⁸ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*: 11-2.

On the one hand, many believe that the *LIFE* for which Christ died is the distinctive religious and spiritual life that is associated with the Church, separated and cut off from ordinary, daily life in the world. Christ died for the sake of the spiritual life.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that Christ died for the better *LIFE* of the ordinary world. Christ died for the sake of the secular life.

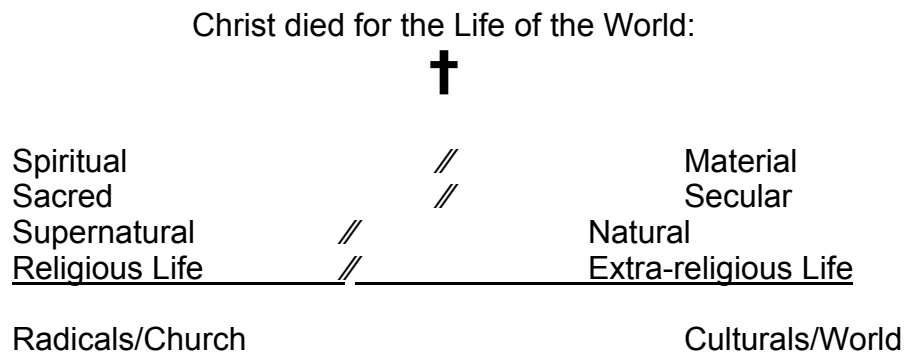
Both groups are overreacting to undesirable trends, the former to excessive this-worldliness, the latter to excessive other-worldliness. Both are representative of the Church of the Extreme, to employ Niebuhrian categories. The first group consists of the “radicals,” embodying a “Christ against Culture” mentality. The second group constitutes the “culturals,” exemplifying a “Christ of Culture” mindset. The answers provided by these two opposing groups are inadequate, according to Schmemmann, and thus the question still remains regarding the nature of the *LIFE* for which Christ died.

What is this life that we must regain for Christ and make Christian? What is, in other words, the ultimate end of all this doing and action? . . . One eats and drinks, one fights for freedom and justice in order to be *alive*, to have the *fullness of life*. But what is it? What is the life of life itself? What is the content of life eternal? . . . Whether we “spiritualize” our life or “secularize our religion, whether we invite men to a spiritual banquet or simply join them at the secular one, the real life of the world, for which we are told God gave his only-begotten Son, remains hopelessly beyond our religious grasp.⁹

To get beyond the impasse, Schmemmann returns once again to the theme of food. Man is what he eats, but *what does he eat and why?* These questions seem silly and irrelevant to Feuerbach and his religious opponents. To religious people, and to Feuerbach, eating is a physical activity: people eat in order to live, period. The only question for both Feuerbach and his adversaries is whether in addition to the material function of eating there is a spiritual dimension added to it. Religious people say “Yes,”

⁹ Ibid., 13.

Feuerbach says “No.” For Feuerbach, eating is purely a physical matter in keeping with his materialist worldview. For Christians, eating is also a purely physical activity despite their theistic orientation. But both of these answers are given in a framework in which there is a fundamental opposition between the material and the spiritual, the secular and sacred, the natural and supernatural. For centuries, these two distinct and opposing categories were the only available categories for understanding religious thought and practice in the Christian West. The spiritual is the spiritual, and the secular is the secular, and never the twain shall meet in religious understanding. Consequently, the *LIFE* for which Christ died must fit one of these two alternatives; no other options are possible. They may be visualized like this:



But Schmemmann has a third alternative to these two traditional categories: Christ did not die for the sacred life or the secular life, but for the *SACRAMENTAL LIFE* of the world! To explain what he means, he presents his understanding of the biblical theme of creation as it is expressed in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find the standard dualistic categories that are so prevalent in Western, Christian religion. The Bible begins with man as a hungry being and the *whole* world is set before him as the provision for his need. As Schmemmann points out, since the world is God’s creation and the food we eat is His gift, the act of eating, typically understood as a purely natural or physical matter, is transformed into an experience of communion with God, and the dichotomy between the secular and the sa

cred is thereby destroyed. In receiving and enjoying the gifts of God's creation, we simultaneously enjoy fellowship with God and gain a knowledge of Him. The spiritual and material worlds, the so-called sacred and secular, are intimately bound up with each other. God is not opposed to the material world; the material world is not opposed to God. Rather the material world as God's creation must be understood as *the sacrament of His presence and provision*.

In the Bible the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake [literally] in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as *communion with God*. The world as man's food is not something "material" and limited to material functions, thus different from, and opposed to, the specifically "spiritual" functions by which man is related to God. All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God. It is divine love made food, made life for man. God *blesses* everything He creates, and, in biblical language, this means that He makes all creation the sign and means of His presence and wisdom, love and revelation: "O taste and see that the Lord is good."¹⁰

For Schmemmann, obviously, the world is not to be understood in Feuerbachian terms as a material sphere, ordered by physical laws, studied by natural science, mastered by technology. No. Schmemmann takes Genesis 1: 1 and its implications seriously. We must make the wonderful rediscovery of the world as God's creation. As the literal translation of Isaiah 6: 3 says, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts, *the fullness of the whole earth is His glory*" (NASB). If this is so, then the world, our earth, "in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history, is an *epiphany* of God, a means of His revelation, presence, and power. In other words, it not only "posits" the idea of God as a rationally acceptable cause of its existence, but truly "speaks" of Him and is in itself an essential means both of knowledge of God and communion with Him, and to be so is its true nature and ultimate destiny."¹¹ Thus, God has so made us that all the hungers of life, represented by our need for food, are to be met through the

¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹ Ibid., 120

substance and stuff of the very good world as a sign and symbol of God Himself. When our needs are met by God in and through His world, we are to thank and bless Him for it in an act of worship that fulfills our true nature.

Man is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for Him. To be sure, man is not the only hungry being. All that exists lives by “eating.” The whole creation depends on food. But the unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to *bless* God for the food and the life he receives from Him. He alone is to respond to God’s blessing with his blessing. . . .¹²

This act of thanksgiving and worship, Schmemmann believes, is the ultimate act of a human being as a human being. We are “thinkers” and “makers” to be sure, but more deeply we are worshippers. We have been designed by God to receive the gifts of His world which sustain our lives. In recognizing their source, we are to thank and honor Him for these provisions. In receiving the life of the world and transforming it into life in God, we become the priests of this cosmic sacrament of creation.

“*Homo sapiens*” [thinker] *homo faber*” [maker] . . . yes, but, first of all, “*homo adorans*”. The first, the basic definition of man is that he is the priest. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the “matter,” the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.¹³

Schmemmann recognizes a deep desire for this kind of sacramentality in the secular life of man. As he points out, centuries of non-Christian thought and influence have failed to reduce the experience of eating to mere fueling. Eating is more than the

¹² Ibid., 15. Schmemmann continues with these words: “And in the Bible to bless God is not a “religious” or “cultic” act, but the very way of life. God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day (that is, time), and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this “very good.” So the only natural (and not “supernatural”) reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to see the world as God sees it and—in this act of gratitude and adoration—to know, name and possess the world” (ibid.).

¹³ Ibid., 15.

utilitarian act of refilling an energy resource. Food, he notices, is still treated with reverence, in the way it is prepared, served, and eaten. A meal is still a rite, a ritual, a celebration, a party. It is, as he says, is “the last ‘natural sacrament’ of family and friendship, of life that is more than ‘eating and drinking.’ People may not understand what that ‘something more’ is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it.” As he concludes so profoundly, the way people treat food and the act of eating show that they “are still hungry and thirsty for the sacramental life.”¹⁴ What, then, is creation in Schmemmann’s understanding? It is the sacrament of God’s presence and blessing.

Given this Orthodox understanding of the sacramental nature and identity of the world, how does Schmemmann conceive of the fall of humanity into sin in Genesis 3? What is the meaning, and what are the consequences of this catastrophic act? As he says, it is not surprising that the fall focuses again on the theme of food. The primeval couple ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in violation of the divine commandment. But the real significance of this act was not that Adam and Eve simply stepped across the line, and transgressed God’s word and will. Rather the fall means the rejection of the world as the sign of the presence and provision of God. It meant that they desired the world as a thing in itself apart from its Maker. They sought to live by bread *alone*. The world is no longer viewed as God’s world; it is just there, not as creation, but as the “uncreation,” mere “nature.” In other words, the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 means the loss of the sacramental life. Schmemmann explains in this way.

The fruit of that one tree [of the knowledge of good and evil], whatever else it may signify, was unlike every other fruit in the Garden: it was not offered as a gift to man. Not given, not blessed by God, it was food whose eating was condemned to be communion with itself alone, and not with God. It is the image of the world loved for itself, and eating it is the image of life understood as an end in itself.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15-6.

Man has loved the world, but as an end in itself and not as transparent to God. He has done it so consistently that it has become something that is “in the air.” It seems natural for man to experience the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God. It seems natural not to live a life of thanksgiving for God’s gift of a world. It seems natural not to be eucharistic.¹⁵

The natural life of man in the world was intended by God to be transformed into life in Him, into communion with Him. Man was to live “eucharistically,” that is, receiving the gifts of the world with gratitude, acknowledging their true divine source. But in a fallen world, humanity lost the power to live with such thanksgiving and understanding. Rather, humanity’s dependence upon and appropriation of the world became a “closed circuit.” It refers only to itself and not to God. Human beings in a fallen estate are still hungry beings. They still seek the satisfaction of their needs in what the world provides. People know that they are dependent upon what lies beyond or outside of them (food, air, water, other people, etc.). But in a state of alienation from God, human loves and hungers and their fulfillment are carried out in reference to the world *alone and on its own terms*. Can breathing the world’s air, drinking its water, and eating its food as *things unto themselves* bring true life? By themselves, they can only produce the *appearance* of life, but the reality of death. “For the one who thinks food in itself is the source of life, eating is communion with death.”¹⁶ When the world is pursued as a value in and of itself, it loses all value. People no longer realize that eating, drinking and breathing can be communion with God. The world is meaningful only when it is conceived as the sacrament of the divine presence. But in the fall, “Man lost the eucharistic life, he lost the life of life itself, the power to transform it into Life. He ceased to be the priest of the world and became its slave.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In our perspective, . . . the “original sin” is not primarily that man “disobeyed” God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone, ceased to see his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God. The sin was not that man neglected his religious duties. The sin was that he thought of God in terms of religion, i.e., opposing Him to life. The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world. The fall is not that he preferred the world to God, distorted the balance between the spiritual and the material, but that he made the world material, whereas he was to have transformed it into “life in God,” filled with meaning and spirit.¹⁸

Schmemmann conceives of “creation” as the sacrament of God’s presence and blessing. He has explained the fall as “uncreation”—the loss of the sacramental nature of the world. How, then, does he understand new creation in Jesus Christ? God did not leave the human race in bondage to confused longings, overtaken by countless desires and hungers for which there seems to be no final satisfaction. They have fought and struggled to find the meaning of the mysterious needs and hungers within. God created human beings after His own heart and for Himself, and only through the light of the person of Jesus Christ is the source and satisfaction of these hungers to be found.

In this scene of radical unfulfillment God acted decisively: into the darkness where man was groping toward Paradise, He sent light. He did so not as a rescue operation, to recover lost man: *it was rather for the completing of what He had undertaken from the beginning.* God acted so that man might understand who He really was and where his hunger had been driving him. The light God sent was his Son: the same light that had been shining unextinguished in the world’s darkness all along, seen now in full brightness.¹⁹

Notice in this quotation that the ministry of Christ was not so much a rescue operation as it was “the completing of what He had undertaken from the beginning.” What had God undertaken from the beginning? Was it not the creation of a world that served as the sign and symbol of His presence and love? Was it not in God that the gifts of His creation were to satisfy the hungers of the human heart? Were not the desperate cravings of the soul pointing to God all along? Does not the long history of religion point

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19 (emphasis added).

in a fragmentary way to human aspirations for God? But in Christ, all religion came to an end because He is the final answer to all religious aspirations and to all human hunger. In him the true *LIFE* that was lost by man was restored, for redemption as new creation means “that in Christ, life—life in all its totality—was returned to man, given again as sacrament and communion, made Eucharist.²⁰ This is the *LIFE* of the world for which Christ died.

From what we have learned so far, we will not find it surprising if the restoration to sacramental life in Christ and God is celebrated, even accessed, by means of food. After all, the bread which Jesus gave for the life of the world was His flesh (John 6: 51). The benefits of this act of total Self-giving on Jesus’ part is received, according to Schmemmann, through a sacramental and sacred meal: the holy eucharist, or communion.

Through Christ, the joy of a purely natural life cut off from God has been put to an end. But true joy has returned in the discovery of the true world. Schmemmann says we must recover the meaning of this great joy and partake of it fully before we embark feverishly on our church programs, missions, projects, and techniques. Joy is not something to be analyzed, but entered in to, and we have no other way of entering into that joy, Schmemmann says, “except through the one action which from the beginning has been for the Church both the source of joy and the fulfillment of joy, the very sacrament of joy, the Eucharist.”²¹ The elements of bread and wine, offered up on the altar and received in Christ and in remembrance of Him at the time of communion, becomes the symbolic expression of whole range of sacramental life. Human life is dependent upon food, upon bread and wine, upon the creation spread forth as a banquet

²⁰ Ibid., 20-1.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

feast. Human beings were created to be the celebrants of the cosmic eucharistic and enjoy the transformation of life in God. They lost this eucharistic experience in the sin of Adam, but in Christ, the New Adam, it has been restored. In receiving the elements of communion, we realize what these elements really are—the gifts of God that manifest His presence and make Him known, and as the body and blood of Christ that makes this manifestation and knowledge possible through His act of sacrifice and atonement. The offering of bread and wine in Christ speaks of our total dependence upon God and His blessings to sustain our lives through the creation in Christ. To offer this food, this world, and this life to God is the essential, eucharistic function of human beings and their very fulfillment.

By way of summary, let me mention three things in conclusion. First, we must recover the meaning of food and the act of eating in our lives. Food can be consumed in five different ways: as *fueling* (the hot dog on the run), as daily, ordinary *eating* (in the cafeteria), as *dining* (a specially prepared meal, or evening out), as *feasting* (say at a wedding or other celebration), and finally, as *sacrament*. That is, with the recognition that our lives and fellowship with God are maintained only as we procure, prepare, receive, digest, and absorb the good gifts of God's world into our bodies and bloodstreams. The act of eating, at whatever level, should always remind us of the very meaning of the cosmos itself, and our ultimate dependence upon God who supplies all our needs out of the overflow of His unmerited grace.²²

²² If you are interested in exploring this theme in some detail, I would recommend the following. Peter Reinhart, *Brother Juniper's Bread Book: Slow Rise as Method and Metaphor*, foreword M. F. K. Fisher (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Aris Books, 1991); Br. Peter Reinhart, *Sacramental Magic in a Small-Town Café: Recipes and Stories from Brother Juniper's Café* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994); Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *History of Food*, trans. Anthea Bell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Reference, 1992). Charles Turner and Gregory Post, *The Feast: Reflections on the Bread of Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Margaret Visser, *The*

Second, we must make the wonderful rediscovery of the world as God's creation and thus its sacramental nature. Biblically, this recognition was lost in the fall. Historically, this understanding was lost in the Enlightenment when God's world was scientifically reinterpreted as "nature." Historian of philosophy W. T. Jones has expressed that the primary difference between the medieval and modern worldviews is precisely the difference between a sacramental and secular view of the world.

Perhaps the principal element of this [medieval] world view was its sacramental outlook. What made Augustine, Aquinas, and the other medieval thinkers so fundamentally alike was this outlook they shared. What distinguishes the modern mind so sharply from the medieval mind is that modern men have largely lost that outlook and now share the basically secular point of view of the Greeks.²³

This is a tragic loss in and of itself. But it is all the more so because many sincere, Bible-believing Christians think more like modern men and the Greeks than their medieval brothers and sisters when it comes to their fundamental conception of the world and the nature of life within it. How can believers today replace this essentially secular and Hellenistic worldview with a truly biblical and sacramental one? Consider a third and final point.

Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meanings of Table Manners (Grove Weidenfeld, 1991); Wendell Berry, "The Pleasure of Eating," in *What are People For* (North Point Press, 1990).

²³ W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 2d ed., vol. 2, *The Medieval Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), xix. Jones continues with these comments: "To say that medieval men looked on this world as a sacrament means, first, that they conceived this world to be but the visible sign of an invisible reality, a world thoroughly impregnated with the energy, purpose, and love of its Creator, who dwells in it as He dwells in the bread and wine on the altar. Second, it means that medieval men conceived of this world as a sacrifice to be freely and gratefully dedicated to the all-good, all-true Giver. Thus, whereas for us (and for the Greeks) the world by and large means just what it seems to be, for men of the Middle Ages it meant something beyond itself and immeasurably better. Whereas for us (and for the Greeks) life on earth is its own end, for medieval men, life's true end was beyond this world."

Perhaps we need to make an important biblical and theological *discovery*, namely that the overall story of the Scriptures and content of the biblical worldview consists of the three fundamental themes of “creation, uncreation, new creation” (or creation, fall, redemption, which ever you prefer). People who only read the last chapter of a novel, or see the final scenes of a movie lack the background and context necessary to understand properly the resolution to the book or film. Consequently, they really do not perceive the deeper meaning of what they have read or seen. Likewise, Christians who fail to connect their understanding of *redemption* to its overall biblical background and context are equally shortsighted and make a huge mistake. New Creation or redemption in Christ is not a thing unto itself. It does not stand alone, but is inextricably linked to the overarching narrative of Scripture, to the fall and to God’s intentions for the original creation. Without the big picture, we will never *truly* comprehend the deeper meaning of redemption or new creation as the essential reclamation of God’s purposes for His entire world! We will not truly understand Christianity as it should be understood, and we will not live it out as it should be lived out until we make the discovery that as Christian human beings we are part of a bigger plot, participants in a grander story that has to do with sacred, cosmic affairs—the creation, loss, and recovery of a eucharistic life in a sacramental world. It was for the *LIFE* of this *WORLD* that Jesus Christ died.

Eureka! Discovering this age old truth may not make you famous, but it will make you rich.

The purpose of this book is a humble one. It is to remind its readers
Our purpose is to show that there exists and always existed a different perspective, a different approach to sacrament, and that this approach may be of crucial importance precisely for the whole burning issue of mission, of our witness to Christ in the world.

For the basic question is: *of what are we witnesses?* What have we seen and touched with our hands? Of what have we partaken and been made communicants? Where do we call men? What can we offer them?²⁴

The answer is: we are witnesses to the sacramental, eucharistic world created by God, lost by humanity in the sinfulness of loving it in itself apart from and without God, and of the restoration to the sacramental, eucharistic nature of life and the world through the salvation in Jesus Christ, especially as this is discovered in the liturgical life of the Church.

The Orthodox may have failed much too often to see the real implications of their “sacramentalism,” but its fundamental meaning is certainly not that of escaping into a timeless “spirituality” far from the dull world of “action.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

The term “sacramental” means here that basic and primordial intuition which not only expresses itself in worship, but of which the entire worship is indeed the “phenomenon”—both effect and experience—

But then worship is truly an essential act, and man an essentially worshipping being, for it is only in worship that man has the source and the possibility of that knowledge which is communion, and of that communion which fulfills itself as true knowledge: knowledge of God and therefore knowledge of the world—communion with God and therefore communion with all that exists. Thus the very notion of worship is based on an intuition and experience of the world as an “epiphany” [revelation, manifestation] of God, thus the world—in worship—is revealed in its true nature and vocation as “sacrament.”²⁶

Secularism, I submit, is above all a *negation of worship*. I stress:—not of God’s existence, not of some kind of transcendence and therefore of some kind of religion. If secularism in theological terms is a heresy, it is primarily a heresy about man. It is the negation of man as a worshipping being, as *homo adorans*: the one for whom worship is the essential act which both “posits” his humanity and fulfills it. It is the rejection as ontologically and epistemologically “decisive,” of the words which “always, everywhere and for all” were the true “epiphany” of man’s relation to God, to the world and to himself: “It is meet and right to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, and to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion. . . .”²⁷

It is not accidental, therefore, that the biblical story of the Fall is centered again on food. Man ate the forbidden fruit.

The natural dependence of man upon the world was intended to be transformed constantly into communion with God in whom is all life. Man was to be a priest of a eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life. But in the fallen world man does not have the priestly power to do this. His dependence upon the world becomes a closed circuit, and his love is deviated from its true direction. He knows that he is dependent upon that which is beyond him. But his love and his dependence refer only to the world in itself. He does not know that breathing can be communion with God. He does not realize that to eat can be to receive life from God in more than its physical sense. He forgets that the world, its air or its food cannot by themselves bring life [man does not live by bread alone, Deut. 8], but only as they are received and accepted for God’s sake, in God as the bearers of the divine gift of life. By themselves they can produce only the appearance of life.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

The world of nature, cut off from the source of life, is a dying world. For one who thinks food in itself is the source of life, eating is communion with the dying world, it is communion with death. Food itself is dead, it is life that has died and it must be kept in refrigerators like a corpse.²⁹

Man lost the eucharistic life, he lost the life of life itself, the power to transform it into Life. He ceased to be the priest of the world and became its slave.”³⁰

But it is the Christian gospel that God did not leave man in his exile, in the predicament of confused longing. He had created man “after his own heart” and for himself, and man has struggled in his freedom to find the answer to the mysterious hunger within him.

And in Him was the end of “religion,” because He himself was the Answer to all religion, to all human hunger for God, because in Him the life that was lost by man—and which could only be symbolized, signified, asked for in religion—was restored to man.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 20.