

“Picture a hen waking up on a factory farm.” This is how James Robinson opens his book *Beyond Factory Farming: A Contemplative-Prophetic Approach to Food*. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), otherwise known as factory farms, are responsible for producing 98% of the meat, eggs, and dairy consumed in the United States. Throughout the book, Robbinson seeks to confront us, the readers, with the horrid conditions in these facilities. This confrontation begs the reader to deeply consider the implications of eating meat of animals who lived in restrictive and unnatural conditions. As Elizabeth Johnson said of Robbinson’s book “Warning: read it and be changed the next time you sit down to eat.”

“Eating is arguably our most intimate form of contact with the more-than-human world,” Robbinson writes. As a meat eater myself, I recognize the complexities that go into personal decisions around the food we consume. Meats contain different nutrients, are an easy source of protein, and can be accessible for people with limited resources or education around plant based eating. With this in mind, Robbinson’s book does not condemn individual eating habits or choices, rather it opens us to a critique of a system, Factory Farming, which is created with profit and efficiency as the goal with no concern for the worth and dignity of animals.

Throughout the book, Robbinson provides a searing critique of US capitalism, which laid the groundwork for the logic of Factory Farming, which has developed fairly recently, to thrive. The origin of factory farming can be traced to a mistake that a farmer made in 1923. When Cecile Steele accidentally ordered 500 chicks, instead of 50, she kept them all in a 16 square foot building. She had nowhere else to put them. Then, she realized how much more money she could make by forcing animals to live in close proximity with less care therefore resulting in poor, unnatural conditions. Steele went on to capitalize on this and others followed along, marking the beginning of this industry. (138)

In this review I seek to bring out Robinson's scholarship in the book, and his way of life which I know through our friendship. To know Jim is to witness someone who constantly considers how to live ethically within our broken and spiritually dead society; he contemplates deeply, then acts accordingly and prophetically. To read his book, is to likewise be challenged to confront the unjust status quo, to ponder one's own complicity within it, and to live anew in this light.

The New York Catholic Worker community plays a central role in Robinson's life and work, as he is informed by the communities he finds himself within. He volunteers twice a week with the soup line at Maryhouse and St. Joes and he shared the work of this book at a Friday Night Meeting. This book has other communities behind it, including also Agape Community, Benincasa, Freedom Farm, and more. As Robinson writes, "[the] illusion that we could do anything alone is the crux of our problem." (99).

Throughout the book he references the old Catholic Worker sentiment that is repeated in many communities throughout the country: "To build a new society in the shell of the old one... a society in which it is easier for people to be good." Translating this idea to his book, Robinson asks, "What's on the menu?" He recognizes that even beyond personal decisions lie the decisions of those who metaphorically and literally set the table for us. He knows that it would be easier for people to eat ethically sourced foods, if institutions, like Catholic Schools, took this concern on as a mandate.

Robinson traces the origin of his commitment to plant-based eating to one day in high school that his twin brother Pat encouraged him to give up eating meat. He had read Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* at this time, and his relationship with Pat allowed him to incorporate this life change. Whereby previously he had thoughtlessly consumed his food, Robinson began

to make connections between a cow and hamburger helper. He writes, “A cheeseburger was just dinner. It had nothing to do with the suffering of cows.” (xii) Robinson doesn’t come across as perfect, or as having all the answers, rather as an honest companion who himself has lived a life in conflict with his values. Robinson opens us to the many alternatives to eating Factory Farmed meat and does not propose any one size fits all answer. Ultimately the book encourages us to “make the connection between the products [we] consume and the cruel conditions of factory farms.” (preface xii)

Robinson points to the interconnected nature of harmful systems that prioritize wealth and greed over the dignity of life. He provocatively asks: “Do we have any sense of the quality of life of the pig whose body has become bacon, or the lives of the laborers who raised and then slaughtered this pig, or the communities living in close proximity to the factory farm on which this pig was raised?”(23) Here we can consider the whole ecosystem, beyond animals, that are harmed within this system.

The book describes the system of Factory Farming as a particular manifestation of, what Pope Francis termed, the Technocratic Paradigm. This lens, as written about in *Laudato Si*, allows us to look at the ways God’s creation is used more for exploitation and profit rather than recognized as the gift that it is. Echoing this, Robinson writes that Factory Farming is ultimately “the application of technology to manipulate living beings as if they were formless resources to be freely molded with impunity.”(126) He goes on to share specific examples of how factory farming is a manifestation of this lack of regard for dignity. Robinson writes: “We can see the technocratic paradigm at work in a particularly horrifying manner in the veal industry, in which calves are manipulated in extremely unnatural conditions in order to produce a desired

commodity.” (122) He also points out how “sows are confined to gestation crates that restrict their capacity for even turning around.” (122)

Central to his critique of Factory Farming, is Thomas Merton’s own critique. Merton, a Trappist Monk and prolific writer, contributed to a pamphlet in 1956 writing: “Since factory farming exerts a violent and unnatural force upon the living organisms of animals and birds in order to increase production and profits... I must join in the protest being uttered against it.” Robinson sees Merton as an example for us to follow as he lived a deep contemplative life which thereby enabled his prophetic writing. “Merton’s deep respect for the integrity of animals... fuels his condemnation of a system that utterly crutches and exploits such beings.” (97)

Robinson’s writing creates a tapestry of diverse thinkers, weaving together vast wisdom. In the introduction alone, he brings together insights from Catholic Theologian M. Shawn Copeland, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, activist Greta Thunberg, Catholic Pope(s) Francis and JP II, and more. Robinson’s voice provides the thread of connection which brings together, elevates, and produces new insights from a conversation of thinkers. Furthermore, the use of language throughout the book invites readers to slow down, to re-read, to contemplate. He writes alliteratively about our “fully fleshy selves” (175), he writes that capitalism relies on our “fundamental forgetfulness” (136), he writes that the unjust status quo must be “recognized, resisted, replaced” (117), and that to remember is a “vividly visceral” (9) experience.

A few weeks ago Robinson came to my class at Iona University, where he teaches as a Professor of Religious Studies, and gave a guest lecture on his book. In class he wanted to ground us within the beauty of creation, through an examination of Icons, while uncovering the often hidden injustice of Factory Farming. The cover of the book has four icons: a cow, a

chicken, a salmon, and a pig. Robinson said that the Icons, 'written' by artist Angela Monno, on the cover of his book are an invitation to slow down and to notice the beauty of each animal. In an age of instant gratification, becoming aware of an Icon is, as he describes it, the opposite of scrolling through videos on social media. Sitting and gazing at an Icon for one, two, or even thirty minutes allows us to cultivate attention and love for the Icon of the cow, as a manifestation of God. Robinson writes: "We encounter here a sacramental being, shining with divine light. We encounter an icon of God's presence. We encounter a being who teems with aliveness, whose instincts are oriented toward freely gazing in a group." (123) On the other hand, scrolling through videos on TikTok or Instagram and moving on after 2 seconds if it doesn't catch our interest, is harming our attention and ability to engage in real life (IRL) community. The technocratic paradigm manifests here too, through Meta and X, within our culture of immediacy and efficiency which creates more profit the longer we give our attention to it.

The morning after his lecture for my class, I went to my local diner to practice what Robinson describes as "sensitive eating." At the diner, I ordered a spinach and feta omelet then took one bite at a time. After each bite I set down my utensils and chewed to completion before I picked up my utensils and continued. For those of us, like myself, who typically rush through our meals to move on to the next thing, often walking or driving while eating, this practice was a huge challenge. The practices in the book open up a different way of not only eating, but of moving through the world.

Robinson acknowledges that the goal of his work is to challenge people to not only think differently, but to act and to be different. Considering the story of the rich young man who walks away sad in the gospels, Robinson writes that Jesus did not ask the man to "be less attached" to money, but he "implores the man to sell his hoarded abundance and to share it with the poor."

(50) In a similar way, he asks us to not only be more aware of the evil of factory farming, but to change our habits, individually and collectively, in response to this evil.

In reading this book, I felt the holy spirit moving through the pages as I was challenged to love God, and thereby love cows suffering in factory farms, more deeply. And for myself, while I still consume food from factory farms, I am more attuned to what I am eating, and I'm questioning more the process behind the product on my plate. I echo the challenge within this book to communities and institutions that purchase meat in the United States and I encourage a thoughtful review and conversation of what Jim Robinson has put forth.