
Christian Vision for Creation Care

BY DAVID C. MCDUFFIE

By applying the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love to how we understand the relationship between God and the earth as a part of God's creation, the three books reviewed here articulate an environmental ethic that is theocentric, scientifically informed, and biblically inspired.

In this era of widespread ecological crises, Christian believers and communities concerned with the protection of God's good creation are asking with increasing urgency, "What is the relationship between Christianity and ecology?" Answering the question is difficult because it involves careful contemplation of how Christian faith, rooted in the foundational witness of Scripture, can effectively address contemporary issues such as global climate change, scarcity of fresh water, threats to biodiversity, degradation of the world's oceans, unsustainable agricultural practices, and deforestation. Does the Christian tradition have a uniquely Christian answer to these and similar ecological problems, and if so, what does its vision of creation care look like? The three books reviewed here—Steven Bouma-Prediger's *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 240 pp., \$25.00); *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (IVP Academic, 2010, 300 pp., \$25.00), edited by Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; and Fred Van Dyke's *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection* (Praeger, 2010, 247 pp., \$44.95)—offer a theocentric vision for understanding and protecting the earth that is thoroughly informed by Christian tradition and grounded in biblical faith.

The theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger claims in *For the Beauty of the Earth* that “authentic Christian faith requires ecological obedience. To care for the earth is integral to Christian faith” (p. 14). His message has been well received among Christians since the book’s first publication in 2001. This new edition updates the survey of scientific research on the environment.

Referring to the book’s title, Bouma-Prediger explains why he prefers to use the term “earth” instead of “nature,” “environment,” or “creation” in arguing for a Christian environmental ethic. The concept of creation is too broad, for it refers all things other than God, which includes the entire cosmos. “Earth” is appropriate because it refers to the life that each of us shares with other humans and non-human nature in relation to God, and is the location for cultivating our understanding of our proper place in God’s earthly creation. “This book is about the earth—the earth God created and continues to lovingly sustain and redeem and will one day make whole—and it is our responsibility and privilege as humans to care for the earth” (p. 17).

His view, predicated on a biblical faith in the goodness of the created order and informed by Christian tradition and the best available science, is a theocentric rather than ecocentric or anthropocentric environmental ethic, “for our earthly home, for all its importance, does not lie at the center of things. God is at the center, and all things...exist to praise God” (p. 134).

In chapter 6 he suggests a Christian environmental ethic, rather than telling us what actions we ought to take, should tell what type of people we ought to be. Drawing on “theological themes that emerge from the biblical narrative” (p. 141), he articulates “ecological virtues” for those who would be caretakers of the earth, such as respect and receptivity, self-restraint and frugality, humility and honesty, wisdom and hope, patience and serenity, benevolence and love, and justice and courage.

Bouma-Prediger calls for a radical faith in the God that is the ever present source of the good news of the Christian gospel, “the God who cannot be domesticated, the wildest being in reality” (p. 186). This faith calls for action on behalf of our ailing planet, for this faith is incarnational and must move beyond words if it is to effectively spread the gospel in a time of widespread ecological crises. “Perhaps,” he writes, “we should, like [Saint] Francis, speak only when necessary and spend more time preaching with our actions” (p. 187). Such action, it is implied, will result in the protection and perpetuation of the beauty of the earth.



In *Keeping God’s Earth*, Noah Toly and Daniel Block commissioned ten essays from scientists and biblical scholars to outline the crucial contributions from science and Scripture in the formation of an evangelical Christian expression of creation care. While, from an evangelical perspective, scientific knowledge cannot be an end in itself but is “a medium by which God’s truth is recognized” (p. 16), the editors insist it is absolutely necessary for

properly understanding the environmental crises we face. Yet, they warn the scientific approach cannot go beyond its informative role in order to tell us what to value and how to properly address the environmental issues that threaten parts of God's creation.

In four sections of the anthology that deal with urbanization, biodiversity, water resources, and global climate change, contributions from a scientist and biblical scholar are paired to provide an informed response to the environmental issues. Many authors emphasize the covenantal relationship between God and all creatures (human and non-human alike), and appeal to the biblical mandate that humans care for and protect the divinely proclaimed goodness of God's creation. For example, in "The Changing Global Climate: Evidence, Impacts, Adaptation and Abatement," the prestigious scientist Sir John Houghton—he is Professor Emeritus of Atmospheric Physics at the University of Oxford and a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his service on the U. N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—argues that addressing the realities of global climate change is "an essential way that we can display the *imago Dei* within us; by caring for the earth, we reflect God's own loving care for the world." Houghton concludes, "As Christians, the issue of climate change goes beyond the scientific data and projected outcomes that I have described here. Environmental justice is a spiritual discipline of faithfulness that comes from the knowledge of the facts and a response of the heart" (pp. 214-215). In "To Serve and to Keep: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Humanity's Responsibility in the Face of the Biodiversity Crisis," biblical scholar Daniel Block argues that humans, because we are at the center of a covenantal relationship between God, the earth, and other living things, have a responsibility not only for our own well-being but also "to serve the primary relationship, that is, God's covenantal relationship with the cosmos" (p. 126).

If Scripture doesn't answer our scientific questions, it offers other guidance: it reminds us of the divine source of life, helps us recognize ecological relationships, and gives hope that creation will be redeemed from the degradation that threatens.

The contributors to *Keeping God's Earth* realize that since the biblical writers had no inkling of the environmental degradation that we recognize all around us today, we should not expect them to answer the purely scientific questions that we face. However, Scripture offers other forms of guidance to contemporary Christians: it reminds us of the divine source of all

life, helps us recognize the ecological relationships that maintain us, and provides, through its eschatological expectation, secure hope that all of God's creation will ultimately be redeemed from the degradation which now threatens.



Conservation biologist Fred Van Dyke attempts to broaden the appeal of Christian creation care for non-Christians who are interested in promoting conservation efforts. In *Between Heaven and Earth* he criticizes those environmentally concerned Christian writers who make claims of "discovering" something "new" in the biblical texts that can now be applied to contemporary efforts to alleviate environmental damage. These writers ignore the rich Christian tradition of reflection on conservation of the earth, as they ply their new biblical theories to an audience deeply skeptical of Christianity's record. In correction of this approach, Van Dyke writes, "these [Christian] ideas [about conservation] are really quite old. That we are unfamiliar with them is the result of a selective loss of our collective cultural memory. And this is a memory we must recover" (p. viii).

Van Dyke traces the Christian conservation ethic from its source in the biblical text through its development in theology and the life of the Church. An early expression of this tradition is the biblical land Sabbath wherein not only the Israelite people but also the land is prescribed a divinely mandated Sabbath rest. "The land Sabbath is exemplary of a pervasive biblical concept, that God views non-human nature as a morally considerable entity," Van Dyke writes. "Nature exists under the sovereign control and care of God just as humanity does" (p. 63).

Christian conservation principles, which spring from recognition of the divine relationship to all of creation, are strengthened by the hope of eschatological fulfillment that includes the renewal of all God's creation. Van Dyke explains, "The Bible's answer is that the fate of nature is its redemption in the kingdom of God. Nature has a future. And because nature has a future, present conservation effort is both significant and appropriate to God's future purposes for it" (p. 67).

Van Dyke admits that despite the potential for congregations to promote effective creation care, they have not always promoted the conservation ideals contained within Church tradition. He calls both conservation groups and Christian communities to critical self-assessment and repentance. The current conservation movement lacks solid grounding in a historical tradition that promotes the moral imperative of conservation and therefore is too dependent on favorable economic conditions for growth. Christian tradition provides such a foundation, but it is necessary for contemporary Christians to reclaim this conservation ethic and act upon it in partnership with the conservation movement. "Christianity is the world's largest and most global religion," he notes, and it has "a consistent record of teaching and at its best,

practicing an understanding of the human relationship to nature that, if consistently applied, brings healing and reconciliation between human and non-human creation" (p. 217).

Van Dyke hopes the "rickety bridge" connecting the conservation community and the Church can be mended to form a stronger partnership to conserve and protect the earth's ecology. He concludes, "Hope is a necessary condition for conservation to possess *purpose*. Purpose is a necessary condition for *meaning*.... Meaning is the prerequisite of *motive*. Environmental science can provide knowledge. Only faith can provide hope, and only hope can give conservation its necessary trinity of purpose, meaning, and motive" (p. 235).



These three books articulate a theocentric environmental ethic that is scientifically informed and biblically inspired. Their common goal is to promote a form of creation care that is both ecologically beneficial and uniquely Christian.

They accomplish this by applying the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love to how we understand the relationship between God and the earth as a part of God's creation. As they examine the history of Christian teaching and tradition, the authors emphasize faith in the inherent goodness of the created natural order, the cultivation of a loving connection with the ecological communities in which we exist, and a hope that life on earth will ultimately be redeemed from the degradation that currently threatens it.

The ethic that emerges goes beyond mere concern for natural environments to include a commitment to the theological perspective that life on earth is a gift from God and recognition that humanity can potentially play a vital role, through our relationship with God, in support of the continued divine sustenance of God's good creation.



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