

Review

Jorgenson, Kiara, and Alan G. Padgett, eds. 2020. *Ecotheology A Christian Conversation*. Chicago: Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0-8028-7441-2

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Evangelicalism has long had a dubious relationship with environmental movements. Environmentalism, according to many evangelicals, takes emphasis away from evangelism, fails to see that the world will be burned up in the eschaton, and is rife with New Age ideology. Among climate change deniers, a contingent of Evangelicals have formed a significant component. This rejection of environmentalism, of course, is not true of all evangelicals, but the number who do reject ecological action is concerning.

Thirty years ago, evangelical books on ecological action were few. My own *Project Earth: Preserving the World God Created*. Critical Concern Series (Portland, Or: Multnomah Press, 1991), very quickly went out of print after fewer than 5000 sales. Yet we now see hundreds of such titles and a growing agreement that environmental care does have a solid theological function. Perhaps this will lead to a tipping point.

Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation, is a welcome addition to theological thinking about our ecological crisis. Patterned on the many “four views” titles published by several presses, the book features four authors, each of whom have written a chapter and provided a response to the other chapters. The authors are Richard Bauckham (British biblical scholar), Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (theological and social ethicist), Steven Bouma-Prediger (theologian and ethicist), and John F. Haught (Catholic systematic theologian). All have written on environmental issues and are well versed in the issues. But they all bring unique perspectives.

The introduction to the book comes from Katherine Hayhoe, a world-renowned evangelical climate scientist and native British Columbian. Her contribution is a stirring call for conversation about the environment, leading to action by Christians who see environmental care as part of our mandate. Her position is echoed by the following authors, all of whom agree that we are in an environmental crisis largely perpetrated by humans and that action is required. Richard Bauckham’s contribution focuses on the biblical text. He decries Christian thinkers of the past who viewed the call in Genesis to “have dominion” over creation as a mandate to exploit the earth for human ends. He also criticizes the “creation care as stewardship” emphasis currently in vogue, because it sees humans as managers over the rest of the world. For Bauckham, humans share community with

the rest of creation. “To see ourselves within the community of creation is to become aware of our own creaturehood and of all we share with the other creatures of God on this planet.” (p. 21). Our distinctive role is within creation, not above it.

A key to Bauckham’s thought is his reading of Genesis 1:26, particularly “and let them have dominion.” Bauckham sees the “and” as largely disjunctive in opposition to the NIV reading, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule...” Rather, for Bauckham, creation in God’s image and the call for dominion are not connected. They are two separate realities. In support, he cites Genesis 5:1-3 where the image terminology is repeated without mention of the dominion theme.

The view of humans as “God’s vicereagents with plenary powers” (p. 42) came out of the Renaissance and is not inherent in the biblical text. To define dominion, Bauckham argues: “It is a role of collaboration with God, not taking his place, and it is a role of collaboration also with the other creatures, who have their own relationships with their Creator, different from ours but appropriate in each case to them.” (p. 42)

The respondents to Bauckham’s chapter show appreciation of his exegesis but challenge his view of dominion and his argument that all of creation has intrinsic worth.

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s chapter stresses environmental activism as the Christian mandate. Creation itself is “love incarnate,” which leads to the question, “Will incarnate love as known in and given by God enable the world’s high-consuming minority to choose life abundant for all in the face of climate disaster?” (p. 76). We must move from moral inertia to moral agency. Our current inertia comes from three sources. First, we have a lack of discernment of God’s “love at play in the world.” (p. 77) Second, neighborly love is corporate, not individual. Third, we lack recognition of collective moral culpability.

Much of our responsibility is corporate, not just individual. “In short, if we do tremendous harm through the systems that generate our material wealth, then neighbor love calls us to seek to change those systems for the good.” (p. 90). The stress on systems is crucial. Many of the forces causing environmental damage are systemic and must be transformed.

The responses to Moe-Lobeda are generally affirming though there are concerns about whether or not we can separate personal and corporate action, and whether we can ever fully see creation with the eyes of God.

Steven Bouma-Prediger promotes a Christian ecological virtue ethic. “Earthkeeping is woven into the fabric of our faith. We human creatures...have the

God-given responsibility of caring for the earth and its plethora of creatures.” (p. 121) In this, Bouma-Prediger prefers the term “earthkeeping” over “stewardship” which carries too much exploitive baggage.

Unlike Bauckham, this author argues that God mandated a special role of dominion for humans by having Adam name the animals, naming being a way of showing authority. Yet dominion is not exploitation. Psalm 72 shows that the ideal king exercises dominion by allowing creation to flourish. For Jesus, to rule was to serve, even to suffer for others. Genesis 2:15 shows that we are called to dominion as service.

Bouma-Prediger’s virtue-based ethics focuses on character. “What we do depends on who we are.” (p. 129). Two virtues are particularly helpful to study: wonder and humility. He argues: “...the virtue of wonder is the cultivated capacity to be astonished.” (p. 137). Wonder is that which evokes amazed admiration.

Wonder’s close cousin is humility. We are both finite and faulted. Since the fall, we know that the world is not the way it is supposed to be. “Aware of their ignorance, humble folk do not pretend to know more than they really know. Aware of their brokenness, humble people do not pretend to be perfect.” (p. 145). Wonder and humility position us to care about and care for the world.

The respondents see value in Bouma-Prediger’s arguments, but each feels it lacks the emphases that their own position puts forward.

John F. Haught’s chapter “The Unfinished Sacrament of Creation,” takes an approach quite different from those of the other authors. Haught shares their concern about the environmental crisis, but as a student of Teilhard de Chardin, he focuses on eschatology, arguing that environmental concern needs to be based on what creation is to become. “A genuinely eschatological faith encourages openness to the divine promise of a fulfillment yet to come, but our theologies of nature have failed to take into full account the fact that the universe may still have a future of new creation and ‘fuller being’ up ahead.” (p. 169).

Haught’s primary assumption is that the creation of the world is an ongoing process. To study such a creation, we have three options: archaeological (scientific study of the earth which reveals a long story with no meaning), analogical (God as sacramentally present in the world, a view which seeks meaning but fails to see the story and length), and anticipatory (we wait for the true meaning and value to appear). Favoring the anticipatory approach, Haught argues: “An anticipatory reading of nature allows us to care for nature because, for all we know, the cosmos is pregnant with incalculable future outcomes that lie far beyond the range of what we can presently predict or plan for.” (p. 189).

The respondents to Haught challenge the idea that an analogical approach does not lead to creation care. While anticipation is a useful incentive, we must deal with the here and now of creation.

The book ends with a short chapter by the editors that compares and contrasts the contributions from the authors. This is followed by author biographies, and names and subject indexes.

Evaluating this book is a humbling task. All of the authors are deeply invested in calling for creation care. All of them have done considerable thinking and writing about the issues and theologies they address. All fit broadly within mainstream evangelical thought, even Haught. This book is a valuable addition to the field of ecological theology and its insights, form a strong theological ethic for care of creation. The views expressed are best taken together, offering a multifaceted response so that we do not need choose one as opposed to the others.

That said, there are a few challenges. First, Richard Bauckham's case for a separation of the dominion theme from our creation in God's image is weak. His argument from silence (that Genesis 5:1-3 does not mention dominion) cannot stand up to scrutiny. As an answer to the criticism that Christians have used "dominion" badly, Bauckham's rejection of dominion as our task is inadequate. A better approach is to define dominion in terms of creation care mandated in Genesis 2:15 (Bouma-Prediger).

Second, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's call for a communal approach to ecological activism is laudable but probably unrealistic. As Bauckham argued, we can't distinguish personal and communal action. While communal action may be needed, it is the individual who drives the motivation of the community. Nor does Moe-Lobeda offer a way out of moral inertia. Seeing creation as the incarnation of God's love is a good thought but not likely a strong motivator.

Third, Steven Bouma-Prediger states what I believe to be a proper understanding of "dominion" and correctly states that virtue ethics (who we are determines what we do) form the proper motivation for environmental action. Yet it is hard to see how "wonder" and "humility" as well as other virtues can be generated in such a way that believers actually begin working for the environment. His is good theology but not necessarily actionable theology.

Fourth, Haught's stress on what the created order will become under that plan of God is useful as is all eschatological thinking. But, if we don't know where God will take creation (a key assertion of Haught), we also don't know what we should do for creation now other just preserving it in anticipation of God's future action.

These are not crucial criticisms, yet there is one that may be more sobering. All of these authors hope that a proper theological view of our crisis will lead to action. This is not necessarily so. We may love God's world, see him "at play" in it (Moe-Lobeda), and even accept the importance of doing what we can to overcome our environmental crisis. Yet none of this means that we will actually take action. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda may come closest to an answer in her call for individuals to see our collective responsibility for environmental destruction and thus band together for a communal solution.

Ecotheology is a valuable addition to Christian thinking about the environment. It is well worth both reading and pondering.

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