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Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection (Book Review)

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Van Dyke, Fred. *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010. 237 pages. ISBN 978-0-313-37536-1. Reviewed by Jeffrey T. Ploegstra, PhD, Professor of Biology, Dordt College.

Fred Van Dyke has most recently been professor of Field Biology and department chair at Wheaton College and is now the executive director of Au Sable Institute. With his extensive research, publications, and professional experience, Van Dyke has helped the Christian community develop an ethic of Judeo-Christian environmental stewardship. And that is the focus of this 2010 book, *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection*. This book is a concise, enjoyable, and powerful tool for every Christian to better understand the relationships between God, humankind, and the rest of His creation. Laying out a framework for considering how we should approach the essential questions of environmental ethics, Van Dyke describes historical examples of how Christians have interacted with these questions through time, illuminates the fallacies of amoral approaches to conservation and environmental ethics, explicates successful approaches to environmental redemption, and unabashedly drives home the need for fundamental change in our relationship with God's world.

One might be tempted, upon examination of the contents, to read a few chapters with appealing titles—a “A Biblical Understanding of ‘The Environment’” or “A Comprehensive Christian Environmental Ethic”—rather than tackling the book from cover to cover. Resist the temptation! This book is undoubtedly more than the sum of its parts. Van Dyke is careful and thorough in the development of his arguments, and to skip ahead is to miss a great deal.

Van Dyke suggests that environmental ethics are usually and inappropriately organized according to one or more of the “great” questions surrounding the value of nature, the nature of human responsibility for nature's well-being, and/or human self-fulfillment through appropriate interaction with nature. According to Van Dyke, these questions are as follows:

Does the non-human world possess intrinsic value, a “good of its own,” that exists independently of uses humans might find for it, and if it does, what is the source of that value?

Is there a rational basis for human responsibility toward non-human environment that goes be-

yond enlightened (human) self-interest?

What is the purpose of environmental stewardship? That is, what value or values are being affirmed or advanced by the actions we collectively call conservation?

Is there a normative basis and pattern for environmental virtues (behaviors of “excellence”) that should direct human action toward the environment and, in the process, contribute to the formation of human beings as “better” people, people who are able to grow in their capacities and skills to do good to nature?

What is the fate of the earth, and does present conservation activity make sense in light of that future fate? (27)

Van Dyke clearly makes the point that ill-considered answers to these questions lead to ineffective activity and questionable dispositions toward the environment. He also argues that, taken individually or as a whole, these questions are “inappropriate language” to speak of Christian environmental ethics. Instead, he talks of the nature of God's love for each part of his creation (51), image bearing (54), serving and protecting (55), corruption (56), judgment (57), covenant (58), sabbath (60), and redemption (64). All of creation is included in the biblical narrative, and that becomes clear through the structure and language Van Dyke uses as he lays out Chapter 3, “A Biblical Understanding of ‘The Environment.’” For most Christians, this should be one of the critical chapters of the book. Our activity in relation to the environment should be seen as part of our participation in the story of God as much as it is about properly acting out our understanding of our relationship to the environment.

The use of this narrative framework resonates with the “between” in the title of the book. It could be seen as an orientation for the rest of the book. It establishes a sense of proper relationship and clarifies that the conversation shouldn't be constrained to the relationship between mankind and his environment; it must start with the relationship between God and His creation—including mankind. Also found in the title might be hints of the existing, unwarranted tension within the Christian

community surrounding appropriate focus. Alternatively, Van Dyke may have intended that we read the title as an indication of our role as image bearers, or perhaps he intended to allude to the title of a 2000 video describing the plight of the Chesapeake Bay watermen, which he also describes in the book. All of these understandings of the title would fit well with the (re)orientation he provides.

Van Dyke continues the process of orientation by describing the historical/cultural conversation surrounding mankind's relationship with his environment. Van Dyke makes very clear what should be obvious: that conservation and Christianity are not new friends. The strong fibers throughout the Christian tradition of valuing and caring for the creation clearly emphasize that environmental ethics are not a side note of our tradition or a new progressive liberal agenda that conservative Christians should view with hostility as resistance to economic progress.

Like a good ecologist, Van Dyke values context and does not ignore economics, theology, sociology, or philosophy. He gives space to each and draws connections between where we were, why we were there, and how we got where we now are. The book is saturated with explications of quotes both contemporary and historical that elaborate on themes of stewardship, redemption, relationship, God imaging, God Knowing, and worship.

Early on, Van Dyke relates the words of Basil, Bishop of Caesarea (330-370 AD), in his homilies on the first chapter of Genesis:

"O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, Our brothers the animals to whom Thou gavest the Earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the Earth, which should have gone up to Thee in song has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone, but for themselves and for Thee. And that they love the sweetness of life even as we, and serve Thee better in their place than we in ours"(75).

Thomas Aquinas (79), Francis of Assisi (82), Luther, Calvin, Wesley (90), Bacon and Leibniz (102), Weber (104), Faraday, Lyell (108) Jonathan Edwards (113), Muir (115), Berry (123), Leopold (125), and Gilbert White (145) all make their way across the pages of the book. That the book is well-referenced and indexed

makes it a very useful gateway into the realms of thought surrounding our relationship with our environment and the historical trajectory that has led to environmental degradation.

Van Dyke rejects attractive but overly simplistic interpretations like Lynn White, Jr.'s notorious essay of the 1970s, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," which painted Christianity as the basis of our ecological downfall. In fact, Van Dyke notes that Christians raised a critical voice of concern during the industrial revolution and were instrumental in forming some of the first organizations to protect wild species (111).

The historical character of much of the book also opens one's eyes to the changes that are too gradual to appreciate. It emphasizes that a changing society requires a constant reevaluation of self and direction as new ideologies come to dominate culture. The materialism and consumerism that have saturated contemporary culture, and sadly much of the Church, have left many environmentally conscious Christians feeling alienated and disaffected. The sentiments expressed through the voices of so many shapers who challenged the common thinking of their day come as air to the drowning.

Besides establishing the framework for discussion and welcoming the reader to the ongoing conversation, Van Dyke clearly lays down the critical challenge for all Christians to meaningfully and sacrificially serve and protect the creation. He states that regular, intentional, redemptive interaction with natural environments should be a normative part of Christian life (208).

He opens his challenge by examining some of the common arguments against Christians taking a more active role in caring for the creation. He contends that these arguments are theologically unsound, self-serving and in some cases, outright heretical. This quote is offered as representative of the opposing point of view: "God does not want us to worship or adore the earth or any of his creations. He didn't even ask us to preserve the earth. In Genesis 1:28 God commanded man to 'subdue' the earth. That is, to understand it and gain mastery of it; to put it to work in our own best interests. Certainly there is also stewardship implied, but preserving a 'pristine' earth may not be in man's best interest. Focus on saving souls" (218). This kind of neo-platonism, Gnosticism, Docetism, and Manichaeism, Van Dyke says, should set alarm bells ringing when actually laid against scripture, yet the argument stands relatively unopposed (217, 222).

Van Dyke continues his challenge using unambiguous language. He plainly identifies that the earth is the Lord's (192), that the creation is of moral significance (203), that the biblical concept of rulership is one of sacrificial service (197), and that this redemptive activity is not only about the effect on the environment but also about loving God and our neighbor and our own transformation (208).

This is an urgently needed clarion call to obediently bear God's image, to love what he loved, to care for what he cares for—no apologies offered or needed.

This book should not stay in the hands of those who find themselves agreeing with Van Dyke. Read it and pass it on. Better yet, read it and buy a copy to give to your sister who just doesn't understand you.

Maraniss, David. *Barack Obama: The Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. 672 pp. ISBN 10:1439160406 or 13:978-143916404. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, professor emeritus, Dordt College.

Long, long ago, biographical criticism—interpreting a story or poem on the basis of what we know about a writer's life—lost favor when New Criticism began to assert that a poem is a poem is a poem, and not simply the by-product of an artist's life story.

Think of the Psalms, for instance: some, like Psalm 51, begin with a preface that indicates when and where David penned it. That's nice and it's helpful. Some, like Psalm 23, don't. Is 23 somehow inferior? Of course not. Furthermore, you can read 51 knowing nothing of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his arranging the death of her husband and still shiver with the intensity of the grasping need for forgiveness.

But for decades, the kind of criticism that would use Edgar Allen Poe's abysmal life, for instance, to explain what he means in his poems or stories was thought somehow a violation of the holiness given to art, to a poem, itself.

Along came what is called "the New Historicism," which essentially puts the creation of a poem or play or novel or script into its own time period once more, but then attempts to explain something about its author and its emergence into the cultural conversation by way of historical events that may not even be referred to in the poem or story, or by the poet himself or herself. While I'm not familiar with her whole canon, it's quite possible that someone like the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro may never have written a story about any character in or out of the War in Vietnam. Yet, it would be foolhardy to argue that, even though she is a Canadian who sets her work consistently in Canada, Alice Munro was not in some very powerful ways shaped by the Vietnam War and the effects of the entire era.

David Maraniss's new biography (the first volume), *Barack Obama: The Story*, takes a kind of New Historical approach to the President's life, churning

up details lots of folks might think absurdly removed from what is relevant. Early on, he draws out the story of Obama's great-grandmother's suicide (in 1926) with the kind of detail that may seem unnecessary, given the fact that her suicide happened five decades before the President was even born—not to mention that vastly more consequential events seem obvious in the President's life (his father's almost total absence, as well as his mother's frequent absences, for instance). But what Maraniss likes to pull from the story is the almost happenstance machinations of history itself, where little things create big things.

If you're simply interested in the present, of course, or in the good stuff (a white girlfriend whose diaries Maraniss quotes, a bunch of young kids smoking pot), the incredible detail Maraniss marshalls out may well seem not only arcane but boring. But Maraniss is a storyteller who not only loves great stories but also has an eye for finding them and a heart greatly capable of writing them. It's a brick of a book—672 pages—but Maraniss is the kind of biographer who knows exactly how to string a story, a thousand stories, into one powerful saga.

Maraniss operates with the theory that any single life—yours or mine—is almost always a conglomeration of nature, nurture, and sheer randomness. Here's an example from my own life: when my grandfather was told about his son-in-law's desire to work in Michigan, he cried, having lost another daughter in a car accident on a foggy night less than a decade before. My father saw the tears and decided not to leave. If he had, I would have been brought up in Michigan, in Grand Rapids. Thus, the lakeshore fog that was the cause of a fatal accident changed the course of my life long before I had any choice at all in the matter. "I believe that life is chaotic, a jumble of accidents, ambitions, misconceptions, bold intentions, lazy happenstances,