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Jeff Ploegstra

Dordt College, jeff.ploegstra@dordt.edu

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Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* by Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014. 262 pp, ISBN: 9780801049651.

Keywords

book review, Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology, Scripture, theology, history, praxis, Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, A. J. Swoboda



ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCING EVANGELICAL ECOTHEOLOGY: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis by Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014. 262 pages. Paperback; \$26.99. ISBN: 9780801049651.

Given this title, you might think that you are picking up a textbook. The title *does* accurately reflect the themes of the book, but it substantially undersells the voice(s). The content is solid, and the book serves as an introduction to the topic as well as a “shaking of hands” with a rich pool of historical and contemporary writers and thinkers. It is a treasure trove of quotes and opens up the scope of the larger discussion surrounding our theology of the created world. Coming out of the Reformed tradition and being familiar with the likes of Cal DeWitt, Fred Van Dyke, Wendell Berry, and Doris Longacre, I was pleased to be introduced to a diversity of other voices, including those from Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal traditions.

This book feels like an invitation to conversation. The self-introduction of each of the authors and their description of their writing process leaves one with the feeling that you are listening in on a very careful, gracious, thought-provoking, and impassioned discussion. In the first section, they explain to the reader their motivations for writing the book, their hermeneutical approaches, and core biblical reasons for caring for the earth. The intentional inclusion of “Tension Points” among the authors lends depth to the book and further invites the reader to the discussion. They even go so far as to explicitly ask the reader to consider their own opinion on a variety of issues, both theological and practical. This is a great strength of the book. It is not a reference manual or textbook, though I have already used it in the classroom. The book has a bit of an episodic feel as the voices of each of the writers emerge. It feels a bit like eating a fruit salad; the flavors blend, yet heterogeneity is maintained. Rather than being disruptive, this promotes a reflective engagement with the material.

Throughout the second section of the book, “Exploring Ecotheology,” historical views of Christians are presented evenly. The ambiguity and periodic ambivalence of thousands of years of Christian thought on the relationship of human beings to nature is not reconstructed to portray Christianity and the church through time as a model of ecological sensitivity and creation care. They do an excellent job of clarifying and critiquing the roots of that ambiguity and show the interweaving of threads of many contemporary Christian positions throughout our theological heritage. They make it very clear that ecotheology is not some new fad but, rather, as they

quote Sallie McFague, “... nothing less than a return to our Hebrew and Christian roots” (p. 126).

The authors’ commitment to a gracious critique of history is obvious; they point out that as contexts and the needs of the world change, so must the church’s emphasis. The authors state, “Good theology ... is always resituating itself in response to the current situation of the planet and humanity” (p. 125). The authors are convinced and convicted that the multiplicity of ecological crises is the “next great work facing both humanity and the Christian faith” (p. 16) and that we bear responsibility for where we are and where we will go in the future. They quote Wendell Berry as stating, “The culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés of the conservation movement” (pp. 46–47). This must change.

Throughout the book, but particularly in the second section, the authors make it clear that our view of the creation is deeply interwoven throughout our broader theological understanding. The authors touch on the interplay between our theology of nature and theological concepts such as the image of God, the transcendence and immanence of God, the humanity and divinity of Christ, the trinity, sin, soteriology, eschatology, the problem of gnosticism, pneumatology, covenant, and many other theological topics. Importantly, the various parts of this discussion closely tie our desire for orthodoxy to our love for our neighbor, our calling to stewardship, and discipleship. Throughout the book, the authors substantiate their claim that “our common call to earthkeeping is a part of our call to discipleship, and our call to discipleship is nothing more than a call to Jesus Christ” (p. 5). This is another great strength of the book. The conversational feel of the book situates all of the addressed issues within real, whole people. Even though treated separately, theology, discipleship, practice, and experience are all tied together. The term “evangelical” in the title appropriately highlights overarching themes of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism.

The third section of the book, “Doing Ecotheology,” outlines the contours of activity situated in our love for God and all that he has made: our neighbors and our *oikos*—our home. The authors clearly articulate that orthopraxis shapes orthodoxy as much as the other way around; knowledge is insufficient. They cite research which demonstrates that there is no direct relationship between having more information and being more ecologically conscious. In parallel to the theological and philosophical connections made previously, the authors clarify the interrelationships between the *practices* of stewarding the creation, caring for our neighbor, and loving God repeatedly throughout the section.

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The “Last Things” section is only last in the sequential sense; in many ways it is the most critical. While most sections of this book are clearly directed to the initiate, this section will be worth revisiting over and over again throughout a life filled with confrontations with the degradation of God’s good creation. It is a calling to continually live in hope and a concise articulation of what that means.

This book is a valuable tool for Christians seeking to respond in love to a rapidly changing world and the ecological crises before us. It is unfortunate that, like many other well-written and timely books, it will likely not be read by those who could most benefit from it. The opening pages describe the impact of climate change on the well-being of a small community in the Gaza province of Mozambique. For climate change deniers, these could very well be the last pages that they read. Given the title, they may have never picked up the book in the first place. Hopefully, those who do read and embrace the message of discipleship deeply threaded throughout the text will put this book, or its message, into the hands and hearts of those who need it most.

Reviewed by Jeffrey T. Ploegstra, Department of Biology, Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA 51250.



TO TOUCH THE FACE OF GOD: The Sacred, the Profane, and the American Space Program, 1957–1975 by Kendrick Oliver. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 248 pages. Hardcover; \$39.95. ISBN: 9781421407883.

This recent book examines several possible connections between religious thought and the exploration of space, more specifically Christianity and the American space program through the Apollo moon landings and shortly thereafter. Having thought about this topic myself—and dismissed any such connection—I was not expecting much from this work. However, although the book shows that these connections might not be present or robust, it explores the issues with depth and insight.

In considering these connections, we can focus our thinking around a simple question: did religion motivate the space program, or provide a post hoc framework for its interpretation? The former might be seen in a general ethos on the part of key leaders or individuals in the trenches. This motivation is unlikely. Even Charlie Duke, who walked on the moon during the Apollo 16 mission and later became an active Christian evangelist, separates any religious drive from his role in the program (*Moonwalker*; Thomas Nelson, 1990). His religious conversion came later. He was driven, as were

many of the astronauts and engineers in the early years of the program, by the need to push boundaries; the motivation was as simple as that. Consider also that the Soviet Union was in space first, and now China has a very active space program—neither of these are known for overt religiosity on the governmental or institutional level (although admittedly we cannot know the inner motivations of the individuals involved). The second part of the question is of more interest and potential relevance: was the exploration of space, driven by whatever motivations, later interpreted through the lens of a spiritual or even religious quest? This is a question explored throughout most of the book.

The book’s introduction is an astute, literate, and readable setting of the culture of the time (the 1960s). This material is not fundamentally new, but it is presented with a different emphasis than in other works, and well done. More generally, the author is willing to look past simple answers. For example, the invocation of religious language (Kennedy asks God’s blessing at the start of the Apollo program) could well reflect cultural/political views, not religious views in any real sense. The author marshals an impressive array of research exploring many related and some tangential areas, such as the rise of evangelism and a look back to a time when technology was seen as a redemptive force for humanity. The religious question is raised early on: is our quest into space performed in praise of God, or rather does it preclude the need for God since we can now reach for the heavens on our own? This is the essential duality explored here: casting off the need for God through our technological prowess, or coming closer to him through our push into the heavens.

The overall modus operandi of the book is to present an example where religion seemed closely and uniquely connected to the space program, and then show that that connection is illusory, superficial, or transient. This is demonstrated through several key themes: invocation of religious language as a motivating force for human exploration of space, use of religious imagery to interpret the experience of space exploration, the religious experiences of the astronauts themselves, and the marshaling of public support for religious expression in the space program. In each case, it is shown that these connections between space and religion are tenuous at best, and history has shown them to be temporary. This is not to denigrate this approach, for it works well in keeping the reader’s attention by connecting with aspects of the program that were publicly visible and easily noted (by those who were paying attention to space through to the mid-1970s). In following these trains of apparent connection, the author brings to bear a wide range of sociological work on American religious and technical culture of the time. Despite the occasional tendency to