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## Economics, Ecology, and the Roots of Western Faith: Perspectives from the Garden

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*Economics, Ecology, and the Roots of Western Faith: Perspectives from the Garden*, a book by Robert R. Gottfried (Rowman and Littlefield, 1995). 165 pages, paperback, \$21.95.<sup>1</sup>

# Economics, Ecology, and the Roots of Western Faith: Perspectives from the Garden

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A Review Article  
by Delmar Vander Zee

view of humankind, and our relationship to and in the creation, by examining our religious and faith roots?

The title of Robert Gottfried's book is intriguing; its contents are even more so. This book is important in that it presents a clear biblical view of how the little economies of human making should fit within the great economy, the economy of God's creation (or nature's economy as some have called it). When Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson were discussing these large verities, they concluded that the only comprehensive concept regarding economics was the "Kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup>

It is here that Gottfried's book wades in bravely, yet carefully, with very readable prose and well-researched scholarship. Gottfried, an economist by training, is well qualified to offer a critique of the limitations of modern economic theory and practice. But he sees beyond economics; he also understands biblical revelation and ecological principles. Such a broad understanding is rare and makes the argument all the more credible. The basic issues he raises and the questions he asks are these: 1) Can the orthodox Judeo-Christian faith help rethink and remedy the present disintegration of culture and environmental integrity? 2) More immediately, have modern Christianity and modern economics both become westernized—i.e., crippled by the effects of the Enlightenment that objectifies nature and elevates reason to the status of a god? 3) Can we re-image our

## The Biblical-Creation Context

The prevailing view, notes Gottfried in the beginning of his book, is that the earth is here for people to use or misuse and that preserving nature does not matter much. This is the conclusion of some reviews of modern Christianity (notably Lynn White et al.) and the evident practice of economics. That this view has emerged is quite explainable from the history of religion and the development of the West, but the question remains, is this as it should be? Is there another paradigm, another image that is closer to the norm of biblical revelation? For this, Gottfried develops the "economics of the Garden," basing it on Jewish creation faith. One, gardens can be viewed ecologically as managed systems, where relationships matter. Two, the Garden imagery recalls that we have lost not only a paradise but also relationships to the Creator and the creation for which losses we should seek reconciliation. Three, gardens are particular places with particular appearances. The Garden reminds us that economics is played out on unique landscapes. Four, "the expulsion from the Garden reminds us that our behavior has grave consequences. We stand accountable for what we do" (6).

Because the two fields of ecology and economics both have as their root meaning *oikos*, or household, both are dealt with in this book in trying to understand and to foster normative thinking. Although this is not a textbook on ecology, Gottfried presents a very good summary of essential ecological principles that should enable even a novice reader to better understand the deeper connections made later in the book. One unusual point he makes is to discredit a

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common Western way of viewing nature, i.e., seeing wild nature as “red in tooth and claw”—the hyper-competitive model of organism relationships that emerged from early Darwinism. Using several examples, he describes a modern and more realistic model of cooperation and mutualism in ecological relationships. The more ecologists come to understand how the world works, the more such interdependent relationships are found.

In this larger discussion of humankind’s place in creation, Gottfried develops a normative understanding of humankind. He uses the Garden metaphor to recall biblical wisdom of what humans are—image-bearers of the Creator taking care of His place, a garden. To the Hebrew there were only two realms, the Creator Sustainer God, and His creation—of which people are a part. Humankind is unique in that its being is derived from a special relation to the Creator and the rest of creation. This special relationship is called “image bearing” and is refreshingly described in its covenantal context, a three-way covenant—with God, with the land, and with other humans. Biblically speaking, humans should have an affinity for the other living creatures. Scripture teaches this implicitly, especially in the wisdom literature and the prophetic passages where the blessing and wrath of God falls on humankind and the land and other creatures. It could be argued that a modern manifestation of this norm is the biophilia hypothesis of E.O. Wilson.

No theological reflection of humanity’s relation to the land could be complete without grappling with the oft-misquoted and abused concept of dominion. But, here again, Gottfried masterfully and biblically deals with dominion in the context of the whole Bible, which does not allow God’s caretakers to exploit nonhuman creation. Rather, justice (*mishpat*), lovingkindness (*hesed*), reflecting the Creator’s care (*shamar*), con-serv-ing (*abad*), and not destroying (*bal tashit*) are the Old Testament threads of wisdom that shape this troublesome concept. Unfortunately, too many modern commentators seeking cause for humankind’s penchant toward exploitation cite Lynn White’s broadside and use of Genesis 1:28 as the sole text to find the cultic culprit of our current environmental malaise.

So what does Gottfried do with the Genesis 1:22 and Genesis 1:28 passages? He explains them in their biblical context. “The Blessing” meant the faithfulness of the Creator Sustainer, a faithfulness that gave the Hebrew people confidence in covenantal prosperity, and that saw humankind as the conduit of that

creational blessing. “People and land together constituted a community living in covenant with the Creator” (41). Furthermore, Gottfried connects image bearing with creation blessing by noting that “when we fail...and exploit creation, we fail to become fully human” (41). We live out our full creaturehood by enabling (reflecting the Creator’s care and blessing) other creatures to live out their creaturehood. The Garden has a gardener. Gottfried’s commentary is very refreshing and biblically true. What is conspicuous (to some sectors of Christian interpretation) is the complete absence of any reference to the so-called “cultural mandate” when discussing these opening Genesis passages. Absent, and appropriately so. Cultural mandate is an anthropocentric overlay foreign to the original text.

In developing the idea of garden economics, Gottfried explores the Hebrew and OT teachings that humans (image-bearers) must act as receivers of gifts (the most important being “The Blessing”) and that the Creator’s gifts in and of the creation must be cared for, not grasped out of fear and distrust. When received as gift, a state of shalom, of wholesome harmony, develops between the Creator and creation, including humankind. The author follows this well-documented exploration of OT prophets and wisdom literature by showing how these texts culminate in the cosmic Christ of the NT, the second Adam, the incarnate one who has created and holds all things together. The author then convincingly links the OT gardener or vice-regent image-bearer to the salvation brought by the second Adam. “Restoring the vice-regents of creation to a right relationship with the Creator would allow The Blessing to flow freely to creation” (53). In a way uncommon to Western thinking, the author calls for what I would call a holy spiritual solidarity with the creation: “Because the essence of being human is ‘being with,’ we become truly human and truly healers only by living with all of creation in its suffering, seeking reconciliation with it and seeking to end its anguish.” When such healing is evident, “Creation experiences the change and thereby knows the ‘revelation of the children of God’” (referring to Romans 8) (59).

Another important insight the author brings is a clarification of what many in environmental circles call the “intrinsic value” of nature, or of the particulars of creation. Gottfried first affirms the Creator as the originator of what we see. The next value is doxological—the creation delights the Creator. Furthermore, and more intimately, because of the incarnation, each and every aspect of the creation has

embodiment (in a sense) in one person of the Trinity. So the value of the creaturely is, then, not strictly intrinsic or autonomous but derived, given, and associated with God. We are, so to speak, dealing with God's stuff when we deal with the creation.

### Transition to Economics

After showing the Biblical place of people as image-bearing gardeners caring for what has been given, the author connects to modern economics by noting that Western people are steeped in materialism—grasping. “[M]aterialism leads people to seek well being in goods rather than in the source of all life. It also leads people to attempt to control the means of producing goods, other humans, and extrahuman creation, in order to assure themselves of future goods.” We reduce creation to a source of utility, exploiting those with whom we are in community. In our continually extending grasp, we move “to change nature in[to] our image, rather than to image healing to creation” (61). Furthermore, “[t]he attitude that allows us to objectify and hereby remove the personal element from creation allows us to do the same to anything else—minorities, women, children, the unborn, future generations, species, ecosystems, and entire landscapes” (62). In this way Gottfried exposes the roots of the Western materialism. Perhaps an alternate subtitle to the book could be: “Roots of Western faith, and fruits of a materialistic faith”!

Does neoclassical economics with its market paradigm provide a model and a proper accounting for the creation with all its components, creatures, and places so that it can be stewarded sustainably? Hardly, and Gottfried elaborates his several reservations. He carefully describes how and where classical economics and markets deal with creation's resources. In this discussion he also is frank to note the many problems and limitations of classical economics and the modern political economy. First, because much of the creation is not owned but is in essence a “commons,” “ownership” of environmental commodities is an unclear concept. And, because some things cannot be owned in any legal sense (air, oceans, views, and wild biodiversity, for example), these same things tend to be degraded in market economics. Second, this same ambiguity extends to “public goods.” Because the market does not supply these, neither is there appropriate reinvestment to sustain public goods. Consequently, for example, the public services of aquifer replenishment are not valued in a forest, and are diminished or lost when a for-

est landscape is clearcut. Third, market economics are not well suited to deal with externalities, whether negative or positive—hence the imposition of fines and subsidies. Fourth, modern economics has not dealt with the economics of configuration—goods and services that emerge from the way the landscape and communities are configured. The reason for the latter, Gottfried explains, is that our econosphere—how the landscape has been settled in the West—has happened largely ignorant of the ecological relationships that were being affected.

This fourth observation is perhaps the most crucial and the most important one because it really includes or subsumes the first three economic problems. The challenges of economies of configuration are closely linked to problems of scale, another point that Gottfried addresses. The insights dealing with configuration and scale are probably the most important contributions that he makes to the interface between ecology and economics. Gottfried speaks authoritatively on the configuration aspect of the issue, having done considerable research in this area. Examples he uses to elaborate on the relationship among the economies of landscape, scale, and ecosystem integrity are clearly stated, even though there is a great deal of technical economics and ecology that attend the explanation. He concludes that because the realities of economies of configuration are ignored in the long run, markets will fail. Because “the market fails to allocate land efficiently between the various uses to which it can be put,” other means will have to be found to deal with landscape-scale ecological and economic processes. “No mechanism exists to determine the correct scale of economic activity *relative to the ecosystems that support it* [emphasis mine]. . . . It [the market] over-exploits natural capital and under-produces resistance and resilience” (86 & 89).

A good example of the importance of configuration and scale can be found in the practice of pollution vouchers. Although developed as a way to monetize and reduce local pollution, the policy assumes and considers the biosphere to be homogeneous. If there is too much pollution one place and not in another, trading permits or vouchers brings resolution. But pollution should not first of all be defined politically or bureaucratically; rather, it must be defined by the needs of particular places, the real ecosystems with their own limits, which are not homogeneous. The economics of pollution vouchers ignores the economies of configuration and ecological scale.

Gottfried also reminds us that we need to evaluate

the assumption that economic growth stems from education and technological change. Gottfried offers the argument that technological change and economic growth in this century could also be credited to the capacity of the environment to assimilate waste (76). In this analysis, education and technology become the instruments of growth. The merit of this argument also calls into question the validity of the oft-quoted maxim of the cornucopians—that we will always find a technological solution to our environmental problems.

### Implications

Gottfried does not merely analyze the theoretical and practical aspects of his discipline (economics), but he clearly addresses the implications as well. And the implications are that we must maintain a resilient, resistant, and persistent natural landscape, what the author calls natural capital or what generally is called the environment. What are the implications of and needs for a sustainable environment? The implications for garden economics are that societies must 1) find ways to define “enough,” 2) examine whether an increase in the standard of living is actually compatible with a sustainable landscape, and 3) find ways that best organize people so that land use decisions become incorporated into the spatial dimensions of natural capital (95).

The key point missing in typical economics discussions, according to Gottfried, is that crucial variable, human motivation. The Jerusalem tradition (and garden tradition) taught wisdom, relationships, cooperation, and mutuality among people, their lands and the other creatures. From this flowed blessings, peace, and wholeness, or shalom. All these characteristics flow from inner motivation or spirituality or solidarity among humankind, other kinds, and the Creator. Are these qualities engendered by the modern econosphere? No, according to Gottfried, “. . .the materialism that drives a wedge between people and the creation represents the beginning of environmental deterioration” (105). “When people want more and more goods, they also want to control the different stocks of capital. . .” (106). This is what the OT prophets would have called grasping for what is intended to be freely accessed as a gift. He cites two large-scale (political- regional) examples of control and grasping that have resulted in considerable environmental and social-community disintegration—Guatemala and Appalachia. In both cases he clearly outlines historically how societal institutions came to embody years of grasping (a human motivation). So,

he explains, “our interior attitudes get incorporated in institutions that, in turn, affect landscape mosaics” (108). All of this underlies economic activity. Hobbes and Locke disregarded the need for “civic virtue,” opting instead for external checks and balances; Gottfried makes a strong case for the inadequacy of this view. He further strengthens his argument by citing studies done in Italy where the north and south have had quite different histories with respect to civic virtue, concluding that virtuous and vicious cycles of behavior do affect future generations and the landscape—as indeed we read repeatedly in OT prophetic history.

The institutional and social restraints on the market themselves do reflect human motivation or virtue. Economies always operate within moral restraint, whether formalized into law or informally as community mores. However, Gottfried warns, markets not only tend to reward opportunistic behavior, they also tend to erode trust. For example, land and labor—which in garden economics are relationships to be fostered—become commodities to be bought and sold under unrestrained markets. To ears tuned to regard capitalism and free markets as great gifts of God, these critiques will seem harsh and revolutionary; but in the light of Garden wisdom, we are challenged to begin to rethink the spiritual roots of Western economic practice. Gottfried’s careful and thoughtful discourse enables us to do so.

Having discussed the economy of configurations, Gottfried spends the last chapter analyzing how land is used, accessed, and controlled. The idea of a commons may seem foreign to the private ownership model of the West; nevertheless, many parts of the world still have common use of resources. Moreover, many things on the landscape even in the West are in common, even though agricultural land and city lots are mostly in private ownership. Consider roads, parks, and other community supported and shared services, such as fire and police protection. Even our vast public lands are common, or should be so managed. But is there a quality about garden economics that would support a community, shared, cooperative use of land over against a strict individualistic use for profit in the short term? Gottfried believes so, but adds, “[c]ommons, unless they are managed adequately, share all the problems of externalities, free riders, open-access property, and so forth. . .” (119). Furthermore, notes Gottfried, historically we are living east of Eden. Most of the world’s people do not get their resources from their immediate landscape; nor is the associated care and management carried

out in traditional community. For example, increasingly large companies whose owners or shareholders are nowhere near the site, extract resources and damage the landscapes. So landscapes and particular places get treated with a "broad brush," as if they were homogeneous, without the close care of a gardener.

In connection with this discussion, Gottfried observes how people relate to creation. Throughout history as societies change from agrarian and local economies to more centralized economies they undergo an "ecological transition." This transition is one where societies have a decreasing awareness of non-human systems and an increasing awareness of other human systems (societies). "The ecological transition threatens the foundations of human survival by changing our perceptions of our relationship with creation, and thereby affecting our perceptions of self-interest and our subsequent decision making" (123). Although Gottfried does not cite the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, I think it is germane here. In Genesis, when all the people were devoted to making a name for themselves, and not imaging God, a great deal of evil was in the offing. "...Then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come let us go down and confuse their language. . . ." (Genesis 11:6b-7a, NIV). This story is about more than a confusion of tongues; it is about imaging a false god, group-think, technological power. Although it has never been called this before, the Tower of Babel story might well be the first recorded consequence of what is now called the ecological transition!

Given our Western self-perception of being independent from the rest of creation, we will need to learn new ways to relate to the earth. Our self-interest must yield to the interest of the land. Using Gottfried's language of gardening, "to manage our land ecologically, we must restructure our perceptions of the world to include our interrelationships with all the parts of our environment, human and nonhuman. This requires us to rethink our values, lifestyles, relationships, and goals" (124). A creation-sensitive mental map must be augmented by societal norms or mores that are the products of local cultures. Thus a model of community is more in keeping with garden economics than a model of rugged individualism. In general then, Gottfried is arguing for a cooperative, local-landscape sensitive model ("the Garden's approach") rather than a set of societal regulations that are coercive ("the Hobbesian approach"). However, he has no illusions as to the

magnitude of such a paradigm change. Even though the predominant paradigm today is absentee corporate landlord, he does cite several examples that exemplify a cooperative model of land use where local needs are met and preserved. Some examples are common-property ancient forests in Japan, land stewardship organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, golfing associations, cooperatives such as watershed councils, and citizen and landscape-based local zoning practices.

### Final Comparisons and Contours of a New Paradigm

Gottfried closes his book with several reflections comparing neoclassical economics to garden economics. Since his words say it better than my paraphrases I will quote extensively from his final pages. He comes down rather hard on the former, noting several deficiencies. Regarding the need for integrity of local places, he doubts that large corporations, whether national or multinational, can "take into account the needs of local communities and landscapes. . . the incentive structure of the market generally promotes ignoring these values and promotes single-minded pursuit of profit." Furthermore, he notes, "[t]he argument for free trade rests on maximizing the efficiency of the global economy, not on providing sustainable welfare for [placed] people" (137).

If a consequence of our bearing God's image is to work for creation's integrity, then we must work for the human-biotic community. Consequently, seriously attempting to sustain landscapes that are "persistent, resilient and resistant" should reciprocally foster human well-being. If Creator, people, and land strongly influence one another (Garden economies), then we should expect wholesome consequences. Gottfried suggests several: a more just society, human well-being defined in non-materialistic terms, an economy where limits are recognized, preserving the land (law of *bal tashit*) with attending new technologies and institutions, acting communally rather than individually, giving and sharing rather than grasping, reinvesting benefits and fruits of the land back into natural and social capital, bringing all public policy to work for the well-being of all creatures in the pattern of the Master Gardener proclaiming "healing and reconciliation for all of creation by the way people live" (140).

We should manage our economy or garden the way the Creator manages the world. We can then conserve with the Creator. This view is unlike neoclassical

economics which views "the economy as a clock, the mechanisms of which can be discovered in natural laws such as the law of supply and demand. If there is a Creator, economists can ignore that fact because the Creator left the clock run on its own. Neoclassical economists only have to discover how the clock works to know how to control the economy." If the rest of creation matters, it is only "as a source of raw materials and as a place to dump waste" (141). This kind of arrogance is inappropriate for con-serving garden economists.

Another key component of neoclassical economics which is at odds with garden economics is allocating scarce resources to meet people,s insatiable wants. Gottfried argues that in a functioning garden society, communities will "restrict wants to fit within two limits: the need to maintain other-centeredness and the desire to maintain the health of the commons." In such shared generosity people will "discover not only freedom from fear but spiritual abundance" (141).

Furthermore, a whole view of society is embedded in the idea of garden economics. In a neoclassical world only individual people matter and social needs are met by trickle down processes where eventually a rising tide lifts all boats. In the garden community there is generosity and love which seeks out all people and other creatures of the community which are valued not merely as manipulable commodities, but as fellow creatures to be guarded and honored. This is a more complicated task than waiting for and expecting a rising tide.

Finally, notes Gottfried, "whereas neoclassical economists can ignore inner attitudes and spirituality because the Creator set the economic clock in motion and left the room, Garden economists realize that motivations and relationships with the Creator matter greatly. Grasping for control brings destruction, whereas letting go of control brings life and shalom" (143).

### Some Questions and Concerns

Although my assessment and review is largely very positive, I do have some questions and concerns to register. Gottfried's discussion of ecological and economic scales early in the book is very good, but he uses scale in two senses in chapter two. The more obvious meaning has to do with size; a second meaning he deals with has to do with relationships between levels of hierarchical structure and emergent properties. Both are extremely important in ecology and economics. A third notion he touches on in this

section deals with landscapes, topography or spatial pattern. This, too, is an aspect of scale, although not explicitly stated. Gottfried would have served these arguments and the reader better by clearly separating and expanding on these three scale components.

In chapter five, the author understandably slips into his most comfortable mode, that of the economist. The problem is not that he succumbs to some jargon, but rather that he lets slip some phrases that are all too often accepted uncritically by business-as-usual discussions of economics and ecology. For instance, 1) On page 70 he suggests that "Society, therefore, pays for extra agricultural land with increased soil erosion and diminished biodiversity." I think this is inaccurate, both in a technical and in a figurative sense. First of all, society does not pay in any literal sense, and secondly, is it not the case that "nature" "pays," or rather, the costs are borrowed from nature? or the costs are externalized? 2) On page 73 he is describing the modern economic model and suggests that "People deplete mineral deposits and degrade ecosystems." On the next page, however, he offers that "Debates over whether or not population growth causes environmental degradation sometimes misses the point." Which way is it? True, not all subsets of the whole human population affect and extract from the environment at the same rate. But, too often the disclaimer cited on page 74 is used (by others) to say the problem is not population, while ignoring the indisputable fact that if there were not the expanding human population *with* their increasing expectations for over-consumption, there would not be a general environmental crisis. Judging by what Gottfried says in many other places, it is clear he understands this, but some die-hard phrases have a lingering half-life. 3) On page 75 he suggests that, "While laudable, even recycling generates contaminants and consumes resources that could have been used for other purposes." True as it stands. But, it misses the point. Society's little economies must mimic nature's economy, which is built on recycling. And, true, we have not learned to recycle with maximum efficiency, but we must keep improving. Gottfried should say so more explicitly on pages 95 and following.

My last critique deals with what was not found. After reading Gottfried,s many solid biblical insights, I felt the book could have been improved with a discussion of sabbath and jubilee economics. Although it might be argued that such was not the intent of the book, it would seem to me that the themes of restoration, justice, concern for poor and

sojourner and wildlife, and return of wealth to the community, all fit in very well with the garden and Jerusalem traditions. I believe there is more to be said.

In closing, I highly recommend this book for general reading by a wide audience (Christian or nonchristian). The prose is easy reading, well documented, well reasoned. He writes carefully, not stridently or accusingly (he images a good gardener!). The book would be very useful as a text or reader supplement in several courses at the college level. Although it is not intended as such, it could be used in a Bible discussion or small-group setting focusing on just and stewardly living. The book is refreshing in that it opens up new insights and ways of seeing modern life in light of scriptural revelation, in light of how the garden might be tended. Another signpost of the Kingdom. Thank you, Robert Gottfried, for posting this one.

### Notes

1. Robert Gottfried is associate professor of economics at The University of the South, Sewane, Tennessee. Page references in the text are to this book.
2. For this exchange, see Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 54.
3. For a book length treatment of this idea see Douglas J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1986).
4. It should be noted that whereas Wilson has proposed this idea (E.O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984)), he would not admit this to be a biblical norm, since his worldview is quite admittedly evolutionary. I point this out to illustrate that an agnostic can discover norms.
5. For a recent rebut of the Lynn White syndrome see Steven Bouma-Prediger's article in *Christian Scholar's Review*, "Is Christianity Responsible for the Ecological Crisis?" XXV:2 (1995), pp. 146-156.
6. This is a powerful analysis because it places some popular social-ethical-political issues into a broader context. For example, evangelical Christians are often chided and challenged to be prolife, but not to worry so much about the life of eagles, owls or whales. Gottfried's argument would extend prolife advocacy to *all* the life that God has created and sustains. When we image God, we care for all living things.
7. It could be argued that the only significant Christian North American subculture that attempts this is the Amish.
8. A book-length treatment of this idea is found in Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
9. Gottfried assumes a wide and inclusive definition of community—it also includes the other kinds along with humans. This ia akin to Aldo Leopold's community concept in his *Land Ethic*, from *A Sand Counry Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), but also the assumptions of the prophetic literature, cf. Joel 2 and Isaiah 58.