



ENVIRONMENT

FROM NATURE TO CREATION: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World by Norman Wirzba. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015. 176 pages. Paperback; \$19.99. ISBN: 9780801095931.

From Nature to Creation, by Norman Wirzba, is a call to become a radical Christian. Beginning with a vision of the world as “created, sustained, and daily loved by God” (p. 3), we are asked to live out the implications of this vision. In the first chapter, Wirzba builds the case for each of us to recognize ourselves as creatures. The author attacks modernity for its attempts to eclipse the existence of both creator and creature. Part of modernity is industrial agriculture wherein “land, plants, animals, and agricultural workers come to be seen as objects of control” (p. 17). One outcome of the creaturely approach to food is to stop the use of industrial chickens. Instead, we should allow them to be free ranging (p. 125).

The second chapter focuses on what constitutes a Christian understanding of nature. In this chapter (as in the entire book), the author does an excellent job of showing how what we name and narrate matters. For example, nature has been seen as sacred, as a place of temptation, as a place where one became an American, a place of individualism, a destination to visit, a storehouse, or a carefully managed park (p. 38). Each of these views entails a different approach to our stewardship of nature. For further exploration, I would recommend reading Christiana Peppard’s excellent essay “Denaturing Nature” in volume 63 of *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*.

In the third chapter, Wirzba sensitizes the reader to the complexity of perceiving nature. Along the way he highlights the noncompetitive relationship between God and creatures. Both perceptions lead to some interesting implications for practical Christianity. One of these implications can be seen in the next chapter where the fundamental importance of land and its care is emphasized. Wirzba shows how our connection with land is exemplified in Genesis and its account of Adam, Eve, and the garden: “... just as the land belongs to us, we also belong to it” (p. 117). This connection involves the production and consumption of food. A Christian perspective opposes today’s industrial food systems, which “presuppose the degradation of fields, plants, animals, and agricultural workers” (p. 121). Wirzba effectively uses today’s raising of corn as a quick case study and finds it failing in its ecological impact. The entire system (including consumers) is flawed.

The final chapter is entitled “Giving Thanks” and focuses on gratitude. I found it interesting and valuable to see the giving and receiving of gifts/thanks as a practice that nurtures and strengthens communities. Gratitude is further seen as a means to freedom.

From Nature to Creation is one volume in a series created “for a broad, non-specialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church (p. ii).” Wirzba’s book succeeds in its examination of today’s thought in relation to faith and practice, although this volume seems to question modernism more than postmodernism. While I think that every Christian could benefit from reading this book, it would be ideal for a congregational study group in which one chapter per week could be discussed. The leader of the discussion group could prepare for these meetings by reading *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology* (see its review by Jeffrey Ploegstra in *PSCF* 67, no. 2 [2015]: 143–44).

I was uncomfortable with the use of the vocabulary of idolatry in chapter two and the use of iconic terminology in chapter three. Both uses seem to me to obfuscate the issues. On the other hand, they may serve to make the issues understandable and acceptable to Christians accustomed to such terminology. More substantially, I felt that Wirzba undervalued the insights into nature that ecologists are making. While it is true that “more knowledge or information about the earth is not, by itself, going to be of sufficient help” and that “what we most need are capacities that will help us love the world” (p. 6), I would argue that increasing knowledge should increase our awe of our environment, both for its dynamism and for the conflicts between individual and community. Perhaps troubling to some, but not to me, is what seems to be Wirzba’s stance that the created world is good and not in need of redemption. This allows, for example,

a tree, when seen by God, is never simply a vertical log with varying kinds of foliage or some amount of lumber. A tree is also, and more fundamentally, an incarnation of God’s love—made visible, tactile, and fragrant as a giant redwood or cedar of Lebanon. (p. 75)

Wirzba spends several pages guiding the reader toward a “disciplined perception” of seeing a creature as a “material manifestation of God’s wisdom and lover” (p. 87). Hopefully, as more and more Christians come to value creation they can make common cause with the modernists and postmodernists who also value the integrity of our planet and its ecosystems.

Book Reviews

Overall, I found the book to be a worthwhile read (I even ordered another copy to give as a present). With over 200 footnotes, Wirzba provides abundant opportunity for further study and reflection. I would recommend it to a Christian study group as a springboard for discussion.

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BEING-IN-CREATION: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World by Brian Treanor, Bruce Ellis Benson, and Norman Wirzba, eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. 242 pages, notes, index. Paperback; \$33.00. ISBN: 9780823265008.

Where do humans belong in the natural world? How are humans to interact with the rest of creation? With the advent of an impending environmental crisis on the horizon, if not already present, these questions become more significant for Christians and the rest of humankind to protect our environment and promote eco-awareness. In *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World*, Brian Treanor, Bruce Ellis Benson, and Norman Wirzba present a collection of ten essays, the majority written by professors of philosophy or theology, that focuses on the Christian environmental perspective, stressing our “creatureliness” and intimate relationship with the rest of creation rather than exerting our dominion over the natural world.

In the introduction, Brian Treanor uses Lynn White’s essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” to help Christians rethink Genesis 1:28:

[White’s essay] places the blame for our present ecological crises squarely on the Genesis account of creation and its subsequent interpretations, taking issue with the apparent claims of superiority implicit in doctrines of *imago dei* and with exhortations to domination and exploitation based on it ... (p. 3)

In essence, Treanor is arguing that Christian interpretation of this passage and the abuse of the environment “has led us squarely into the environmental crisis by suggesting that we have absolute dominion over the earth, including the right to use it in a gluttonous or profligate way” (p. 3). The essays comprising the remainder of this anthology aim to help the reader

rethink (or reconnect with) what it means to be human in the wider context of creation ... we will never live sustainably over the long haul unless and until we come to accept that we are just one type of creature among many fellow creatures, rather than omnipotent gods exercising capricious (and intemperate) dominion over the rest of the cosmos. (p. 13)

In his essay “Rowan Williams and Ecological Rationality,” Jarrod Longbons uses Rowan Williams’s view that the ecological crisis is “an opportunity that causes society to rethink life with a necessary ecological rationality that can help us rediscover some of the implications of the Christian doctrine of creation” (p. 37). Longbons also cites Williams to support his argument that humans and nonhumans have a reciprocal relationship, as both live in interconnectivity with one another:

To understand that we and our environment are alike in the hands of God, so that neither can be possessed absolutely, is to see that the mysteriousness of the interior life of another person and the uncontrollable difference and resistance of the material world are connected. (p. 41)

This rationale “reveals human relationship to and responsibility for nature, despite the two obvious differences between these two classes of creatures” (p. 41). At the heart of Longbons’s argument is the idea that society, as it becomes more materialistic, is apathetic to nonhuman life; however, rethinking the doctrine of creation calls Christians to bring nature closer to the Creator, as “Christianity compels humans to bridge God’s life and the world’s life” (p. 49).

Similarly, Norman Wirzba’s essay, entitled “The Art of Creaturely Life: A Question of Human Propriety,” focuses on the intimate relationship between humans and nonhumans. Wirzba begins by focusing on the beginning of human life in the Garden of Eden. Adam was created from the soil, and animals and plants are likewise largely dependent on the soil. Wirzba cites Wendell Berry, stating that “the soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all ... Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life” (pp. 53–54). Wirzba is arguing that there is a circle of life that ultimately ends in the soil, and by failing to care for it, we are taking “a stance against creation” (p. 54). He finishes the essay using a gardener and a gardener as an example for creation in its entirety: “A gardener cannot simply impose her will upon the garden ... A gardener, in other words, gives herself to the garden so that the garden can flourish” (p. 72). As Christians, we are called to this type of self-offering to form a new relationship with God’s creation, not simply imposing our will on the world around us and exploiting God’s gift to humankind.

The idea of the divine call to care for creation is evident in Christina M. Gschwandtner’s “Creativity as Call to Care for Creation? John Zizioulas and Jean-Louis Chrétien.” She argues that Chrétien suggests