

# Book Reviews



## ENVIRONMENT

**EARTHKEEPING AND CHARACTER: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic** by Steven Bouma-Prediger. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020. 208 pages. Paperback; \$24.99. ISBN: 9780801098840.

Steven Bouma-Prediger has provided us with another gem in this accessible, timely, and hospitable exploration of ecological virtue ethics. With gentle prose and storytelling, he invites readers to imagine themselves as the kind of people who are good and do good for the earth-system of which we are a part.

The book begins with a careful exposition of the title and intent of the book. There is a pithy explanation of virtue ethics and their relationship to other ethical approaches (deontological, consequentialist, etc.). He carefully dismantles criticisms of virtue ethics and lays out a framework for understanding ourselves as narrative-driven, imaginative beings. The rest of the book takes this idea seriously by engaging each of the ecological virtues through brief stories from his own life and from the lives of those who he feels embody the virtues, as well as from the larger narrative of scripture.

The book is packed with familiar voices: more-contemporary writers such as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Bill McKibben; and those from deeper in our history such as Aquinas, Augustine, Plato, and Aristotle. This book points the reader to many other important thinkers and pulls together a broad swath of relevant ideas and themes from ecology, philosophy, and theology. As a result of reading this book, I have read more volumes from new authors as well as unfamiliar works by familiar authors. The appendices themselves are a useful resource. They include a brief and informative survey of Christian environmental virtue ethics, over twenty pages of notes from the chapters, a fifteen-page bibliography, a scripture index, and a subject/name index.

The virtues are engaged in pairs in chapters 2–5: wonder and humility, self-control and wisdom, justice and love, courage and hope. Each chapter starts with a story, moves into a survey of wisdom from across the ages, dives deeply into scripture and the history of the church, and ends with a description of someone who embodies the virtues addressed in the chapter.

In chapter 2 we are invited to live with “amazement and modesty.” The book describes this as “the settled disposition to stand in rapt attention and enthralled amazement in the presence of the awe-inspiring natural world” (p. 43) and to “have a proper sense of who we are and what we know” (p. 45). To help us imagine this deeply, Bouma-Prediger opens a window into the life of John Muir as an embodiment of these virtues. Muir’s

exhilarating, reverent, and, at times, terrifying life, lived in wild places, is inspiring.

Chapter 3 describes what it means to live with “strength of mind and discernment.” The author describes this as developing “the habitual disposition to control our desires when it comes to caring for the natural world” (p. 66). We can learn to say, “I am content; I have enough; I don’t need more” (p. 66). We can develop “the disposition to make insightful and discerning judgments about our common home, the earth,” to “recognize what the greatest good really is,” and to acquire “the practical knowledge needed to attain it” (p. 66). Susan Drake Emmerich is presented to us as someone who has lived out these virtues in her engagement with the Tangier Island community in Chesapeake Bay and the transformation of their local ecosystem.

In chapter 4, Bouma-Prediger speaks of “living with respect and care.” He describes this as “the disposition to act equitably” and “the ability to discern when to treat equals equally and unequals differentially ... a kind of practical wisdom” (p. 92). We can live with “the settled disposition to care about our house (*oikos*) and its inhabitants—to promote the flourishing of all creatures” (p. 95). He then offers the example of Wangari Muta Maathai and her work creating the Green Belt Movement in Nairobi, Kenya. The planting of over 51 million trees and the training of over 30,000 women in associated occupations clearly connects the flourishing of people and place.

In chapter 5, we consider what it means to live with “fortitude and expectation.” We are asked to imagine ourselves having “moral strength when fearful about real or potential ecological losses and steadfast endurance in the face of seemingly intractable ecological problems” (p. 117) and exhibiting the “settled disposition to yearn for and act to bring about ... God’s good future of shalom for all the earth” (p. 119). We are presented here with the work and life of Jane Goodall, who persisted in her ground-breaking, controversial, and illuminating work with chimpanzees despite serious conservation challenges, a skeptical academic community, and the pervasive sexism of the time.

This book is wonderful in that it makes earthkeeping approachable for everyone. Too many people feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues we face and do not really know how to proceed. By focusing first on being the kind of people who cultivate wonder, who leave a camp site clean and ready for the next camper, who tend a nest-egg grove, who grieve the violation or loss of beautiful places, we will gravitate toward the kinds of actions and ends that bring hope for our future. Ecological virtues are not sufficient, but they are orienting, shaping, and driving. Bouma-Prediger’s book is convincing in this. It is clarifying and invigorating in the stories and examples provided. If you are looking

for a hopeful vision pointing toward a new creation, start here.

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## HISTORY OF SCIENCE

**SCIENCE WITHOUT GOD? Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism** by Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 263 pages. Hardcover; \$90.00. ISBN: 9780198834588. Ebook; \$70.19. ISBN: 0198834586. Audiobook (Narrated by Sean Runnette); \$19.99. ASIN: B07PDNRJHC.

Over the past half century, historians of science have done much to discredit popular myths so that, among other things, it is now clear that medieval Christians did not believe the earth was flat and Galileo was never imprisoned by the Inquisition. Among the more interesting is Ronald Numbers's critique of the thesis that science's success at explaining phenomena in terms of natural causes alone is necessarily corrosive of religious belief. In his 2007 essay "Science without God," Numbers notes that religious belief even motivated the development of naturalism as a scientific investigative tool in the sciences, even though the subsequent relationship between scientific naturalism and belief was not always one of unalloyed harmony. It is therefore fitting that further exploration of the complex relationship between naturalism and belief formed the topic of discussion at the 2013 conference celebrating Numbers's retirement from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The papers from that conference form the basis for this volume, which bears the same title as Numbers's original essay and is edited by Jon H. Roberts of Boston University and Peter Harrison of the University of Queensland.

Harrison's introductory essay frames the collection, first by suggesting that the historical record problematizes a simplistic "connection between naturalism and human progress," in part, because ideas about what is natural and supernatural are "interdependent" and rest upon "deeper metaphysical or theological assumptions" (p. 6). It then introduces general features of the different views about naturalism and supernaturalism present throughout the volume and how these helped shape understandings of the laws of nature, the human person, and the human sciences (history, biblical criticism, and anthropology).

Harrison concludes his introduction with what may be taken as a fitting summary of the book, namely that the history of science is not one of naturalism supplanting supernaturalism but rather that "a version of naturalism flourished in the Middle Ages, to be replaced during the scientific revolution with a version of supernaturalism" (p. 18). The essays which form the bulk of *Science without God?* collectively document this shift and outline some of its causes and consequences. Daryn

Lehoux explains how Greco-Roman natural philosophy generally presupposed some sort of divinely ordered cosmos with the only exception, Epicureanism, incorporating decidedly a nonnatural arbitrary swerve into its physics. Then, contrary to the claims of those who might think that the church suppressed naturalism in the Middle Ages, Michael Shank shows that "naturalist attitudes were already endemic and widespread and, for the most part uncontroversial in late-medieval learned culture" (p.39). Next, Peter Harrison explores how early modern understandings of nature as governed by divinely ordained laws (Descartes) or behaving in lawlike ways due to divine consistency (Newton) were susceptible to theologically suspect if not wholly naturalistic interpretations. The latter issue is then further explored by Shank, who describes how Newton's physics could be co-opted by Enlightenment propagandists, to the point where even the pious (if heterodox) Newton was recast as a thoroughgoing naturalist.

The remaining chapters explore interactions between various shades of scientific naturalism and religion. A common theme is that science may be read naturalistically in different ways and often for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the science itself. Matthew Stanley points out that physics was only stripped of its theistic connotations in the Victorian era, due to the efforts of secular naturalists to ensure that physics students (and by implication subsequent generations of physicists) were taught only naturalistic views of the subject. John Hedley Brooke notes that chemistry too served as a locus of reverence for the devout chemists while sustaining the reductionist materialist views of irreligious ones, views that in turn commonly arose through consideration of such nonscientific factors as the problem of evil or clergy misconduct. Even then, when science was understood in naturalistic terms, it was often shaped in ways that reflected the religious context in which it was developed, as Michael Ruse points out in his engaging and lively argument for the existence of Christian undertones in modern evolutionary biology. Other chapters by Michelle Pfeffer, Jon H. Roberts, Nicolaas Rupke, Scott Gerard Prinster, and Constance Clark further illustrate the flexibility of naturalism, specifically in the context of Christian materialist conceptions of the soul, materialistic and reductionist tendencies in psychology, the relationship between the Bible and nineteenth-century geology, biblical criticism, and the development of anthropology as a discipline. These chapters also illustrate how different varieties of naturalism might be used in shaping science's development to reflect particular interests. As Bernard Lightman illustrates in the concluding chapter, even when these interests involved using naturalism as a tool for secularization, religious influences played a role. Thomas Henry Huxley, John Tyndall, and Herbert Spencer "were still thinking in Christian terms" as they crafted secularized natural theologies, theodicies, and eschatologies into what they saw as a "spiritually fulfilling" scientific naturalism (pp. 252–53).