
Marie George’s brief, readable book exhibits a too-rare combination: genuine passion for environmental stewardship and commitment to authentic Christian reflection on the subject. George’s starting point is not secular environmentalism but Church teaching. In other words, she recognizes that environmental activism cannot really be effective without grounding itself in the truth, beginning with the facts that God is the Creator, that creation is good but corrupted by sin, and that human beings, the pinnacle of creation, are charged with stewardship of the created world.

The book is arranged in four chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter is a brief and therefore necessarily limited discussion of its topic; the book is evidently intended as a study guide for small groups or as a supplementary textbook for courses in moral theology or social ethics. (There is a set of discussion questions at the end of each chapter.) Its tone is not textbookish, however, and it could be encountered profitably by any general reader interested in the subject.

The first chapter identifies the “causes of environmental degradation.” George ranges widely, citing ideological sources such as the “Baconian vision of nature”; individual failures, such as the sins of laziness and greed; and social realities such as poverty. This overview demonstrates the strength of George’s grasp of the subject: Her approach is basic, but not simplistic. The causes of environmental damage are multiple and not always easily identified, let alone addressed; any proposed solution must be equally intelligent.

Any solution also must begin with an adequate anthropology, and George undertakes the task of laying one out in chapter 2, “Creation: Its Meaning and the Place of Humans in It.” Following Church teaching as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, George dismisses cavalier misreadings of the Genesis “dominion” mandate, highlighting the distinction between stewardship and exploitation. Hers is not a romantic environmental ethic, though. Rooted as her book is in the concrete and everyday, George notes the sometimes forceful resistance of the earth to human cultivation by reference to her experience of returning from a month-long absence to find her garden overrun with weeds. “Hours of work were needed to reclaim this tiny garden,” she writes, a microcosmic example of the fact that, where hunger looms, “failure to subdue the earth … spells death” (28).
Chapter 3 extends this theological foundation specifically to the morality of human action with respect to the environment. George astutely locates a key moral norm in one of the principles of Catholic social teaching: the universal destination of goods. Using this principle provides a rationale for Christian environmentalism—destruction of natural resources by groups or individuals violates the obligation to maintain such resources for the use of all—but it also furnishes a guide to placing environmental concern into proper perspective. The goods of the earth are intended for human use: In the case of tension between human need and natural preservation, human need must weigh heavier in the balance. As George puts it, the human right to life is a “trump card.”

George’s final chapter is devoted to finding “Christian Solutions to Environmental Problems.” This is the longest chapter. For many, no doubt, it will also be the most interesting, for here George seeks to apply the tools organized in the preceding sections. For those wondering what it means to be “a good Catholic” with respect to the environment, George is an able guide. Especially refreshing is her emphasis on practical, feasible ways that individuals can practice environmental stewardship. She by no means ignores public policy issues, but it is all too easy for Christians to focus on policy environmentalism (over which they frequently have little control and the merits of which are often debatable) instead of the quotidian actions and omissions for which they are directly responsible—and which, not coincidentally, require greater exertion of the will and moral discipline than does pontificating about evil corporations or urban sprawl.

There are things to quibble about. George rightly recognizes that all technological advance entails environmental tradeoffs, that such progress can both introduce new forms of environmental degradation and alleviate old ones. Yet, she arguably underemphasizes the role that economic development plays in improving measures of environmental well-being. For all the insight and courage she deploys in charting a path independent of faddish environmentalism, she occasionally succumbs to similar errors. One is using the term non-sustainable unselfconsciously. The word is virtually de rigueur in contemporary discussions of environmental issues, but what does it mean? Sustainable for a hundred years? A thousand? However defined, sustainability is inherently relative: What seems unsustainable today may be rendered sustainable by new technology tomorrow; or, more likely, the practice itself will be rendered obsolete. The concept of sustainability is potentially useful—it addresses the question of whether the world’s natural goods will be available to future generations—but we must be careful not to use it
arbitrarily as a term of opprobrium for whatever practice we happen personally to detest.

Any such quibbles do not undermine the book’s value, however, because, concerning everything of central importance, George is thorough and reliable. Her environmental ethic is founded on a sound theology of creation. The obligations of the Christian toward the environment are fundamentally applications of the Christian virtues of prudence, temperance, courage, and so on. Specific applications in some cases will be fairly obvious and unexceptionable (don’t litter); in other cases, they will be open to debate among people of good will. (Do we need to address climate change? If so, how?) George holds opinions about specific matters, but she appreciates the complexity, tradeoffs, and unintended consequences inherent in both personal activity and policy. Thus, she never lets her enthusiasm for a particular cause lead her to castigate those who may disagree. In sum, anyone looking for a concise introduction to a Catholic vision of environmental responsibility would do well to look at Marie George’s *Stewardship of Creation*.

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