
Book Review

G.F. Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden: A Subversive Christian Theology of Creation and Ecology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Publications, 2020), 206 pp., \$27.00 (pbk), ISBN: 9781532677427.

In *Plundering Eden*, G.F. Wagenfuhr tackles twenty-first-century treatment of the earth from the top down. The book begins with the argument that humanity has become a cosmic parasite that ‘plunders the whole of creation, subjecting it to profound suffering’ (p. xi). While ecologists identify humans as a foundation or keystone species operating as a top consumer, Wagenfuhr compares humanity to ‘a worm that sucks its host dry’ (p. xii). Even though the outcome will be the death of the host, no one intended this: ‘It just happened that way as humans have pursued their own common good’ (p. xii).

Plundering Eden provides a brief review of three issues—climate change, soil depletion, and species destruction—and then deconstructs human imagining of the cosmos, civilization, economies, technology, and cities. In the case of ‘economic imaginary’, for example, Wagenfuhr proposes people hold contradictory beliefs that the planet’s resources are both limited and infinite and can continually absorb a flood of pollutants. *Plundering Eden* rejects capitalism as parasitism because: ‘It reduces everything to a constituent material reality, and systematically creates the conditions in which maximal exploitation, which is called “development,” is the highest good’ (p. 58). Socialism and secularism are equally forms of materialism, and economics is ‘a vast mathematical religion’ (p. 60). Wagenfuhr purports that religion can provide an ‘imagining’ replacing socially constructed belief systems that promulgate ecological destruction. While paganism and older variants of world religions from the axial age will fail, Christianity can rise to the challenge. Wagenfuhr’s analysis relies heavily on a few selected authors, including Jacques Ellul’s commentaries on technology and urbanization and David Graeber’s politically evocative works conveying the Occupy Movement’s values, particularly *Debt: The First 5000 Years*.

In outlining a ‘subversive theology of creation’, Wagenfuhr rejects natural theology as ‘the most basic and ignorant form of projection, creating a picture of a deity by interaction with one’s environment’ (p. 87). He presents the creation as a finished event, thereby dismissing creation as an on-going process or humans as co-creators. Humans are creatures and not here to perfect the planet. Nor are they vice-regents, priests, or stewards of creation. Wagenfuhr argues against God knowing things as things, but rather God ‘knows creatures as his creatures....Thus all of God’s knowledge is relational’ (p. 100). Utilitarian or instrumental worth is inherently false. Wagenfuhr reasons: ‘For God, the creation is not understood as a resource to be harvested for the purpose of further creation, or further refinement....Creation has no use-value’ (p. 93).

Taking a Calvinist turn, Wagenfuhr devotes a chapter to sin and temptation, which he asserts underlie human descent into parasitism. *Plundering Eden* adopts the traditional Reformed perspective that the moral disaster of Genesis 2 ‘begins with a desire for godlikeness’ (p. 120). Sin is environmentally relevant because: ‘The temptation to be like God, then, is a temptation to become judges or creators of value’ (p. 108). The enticement of the crafty serpent is to ‘move from creature to creator’ by becoming co-creators (p. 108). Sin disrupts the Sabbath and ousts Adam and Eve from their fruit-gathering economy, forcing them to face scarcity and tillage’s hard labor. God does not directly curse the soil; humans curse the ground via their repurposing of it. Wagenfuhr briefly compares his ideas concerning agrarian lifestyles to Wendell Berry’s and Norman Wirzba’s but does not engage the broader range of scholars, such as Walter Brueggemann, constructing Biblical theologies of the land. Many of them would likely disagree with Wagenfuhr about the spiritual roots of farm work while concurring: ‘The land is a blessing, not a resource’ (p. 128). *Plundering Eden* concludes that sin causes ‘estrangement from the Creator’ (p. 119). In the process, sin constructs a new reality, and ‘creation becomes chaos’ (pp. 119–120). The solution to the dilemma is reconciliation with God, which in turn generates reconciliation with creation.

In contrast to the recent surge of green Biblical interpretation, *Plundering Eden* claims: ‘If the Bible is a resource for ecological ethics, then it actually has very little to offer’ (p. 167). Wagenfuhr is concerned that Christian ecotheology diminishes divine authority, and ‘runs the risk of making God himself a resource for human exploitation as a new ‘species survival’ (p. 167). He proposes replacing flawed approaches with a means ‘ecclesiological ecology’, recognizing the church as the body of Christ, and the presence of God in the world. The *ekklesia* is an embassy, acting as the ‘politico-religious representation of God’ (p. 162).

Readers tracking trends in Protestant and Evangelical environmental thought will find Wagenfuhr’s synthesis of ideas stemming from politically radical, anarchist, or postmodern positions, with a portrait of a very omnipotent God, interesting and perhaps unsettling. *Plundering Eden* questions some widely accepted tenets of Calvinist cosmology. Wagenfuhr holds: ‘The *ekklesia* exists to make the cosmos implausible’ (p. 166). As Mark Stoll has documented in *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, American Calvinists, like Presbyterian Johnathan Edwards, have normatively concurred with the Westminster Confession of 1647 that ‘The light of nature, and the works of creation’ manifest or display ‘the goodness, wisdom, and power of God...’ (Stoll, 2015: p. 21). Wagenfuhr asserts, in contrast, ‘God cannot be known by investigation of creation...’, and due to sin, is not revealed to humans as Creator, but only as Reconciler (pp. 150–151). *Plundering Eden* also directly critiques *Laudato Si’*, the Eastern Orthodox concept of *theosis*, and a half-century of ecofeminist theory.

Wagenfuhr believes ecclesiological ecology has three options for a public ethical strategy: overpower the global forces parasitizing the earth, abandon the world, or the best approach, subversion. Subversion dismantles ‘structures of power by destroying the belief structures that uphold them’ (p. 183). The church as embassy must defeat and replace myths such as progress in technology, civilization in the city, and power in politics. Via subversion, the maturity of God’s kingdom will displace the juvenile imaginary of the Anthropocene.

References

- Graeber, David. 2012. *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House).
- Stoll, Mark. 2015. *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press).

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