
Book Review

James S. Mastaler, *Woven Together: Faith and Justice for the Earth and the Poor* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 148pp., \$22.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1532661679.

Holmes Rolston III in his Foreword describes James S. Mastaler's book as 'an intense effort to weave things together', with the things being 'Christian concern for the Earth and for the poor on Earth, environmental ethics, and environmental justice' (p. ix). The book is written by a theologian for a Christian audience, mainly progressive Christians, but hoping also to appeal to evangelicals. Mastaler draws on the large body of work in environmental ethics, Christian theology, and religious studies, including Natalie Merchant, Sallie McFague and other well-known scholars to ground his argument. His stated purpose is to give readers something to think about that will lead them to action, 'something that challenges the way you see yourself and the world' (p. xxi). In this sense the book has a practical emphasis, imploring Christians to take action to address the interrelated problems of climate change and global poverty. He hopes to do this by changing the story that guides us to either action or inaction, citing Max Oelschlager's (1994) assertion that humans are 'culture-dwelling storytellers' (p. 12). He rightly points out that people are not swayed to change their minds by being presented with facts, as is evident in literature on the acceptance of climate change. People are persuaded by the narratives they create and inherit.

In four short chapters, Mastaler lays out his argument, beginning by explaining the human need for stories as a means to guide action. He cites research on climate change education that has demonstrated that 'improved scientific literacy' does not lead people to take action to combat climate change (p. 2). He notes that for many people on the planet, 'religious narratives profoundly shape the way they live in the world', and therefore a change in sacred stories is much more likely to be an effective motivator than science (p. 4).

He then moves in the second chapter, aptly named 'Facing the World as it Is', to describe what is wrong with the world and how the current narrative of global free market capitalism has led us to this place. He explains the different types of poverty globally and lays out how social and ecological concerns are deeply interconnected, arguing 'many of the most pressing social injustices are as rooted in ecological problems as are ecological problems rooted in global systems of injustice' (p. 34).

The third chapter is poetically called 'A Faint Tracing on the Surface of Mystery', a phrase used by author Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1998). In it he surveys some of the fruits of Christian theology throughout time that are useful examples for renewal of Christian theology. These include biblical texts that focus on creation as well as the work of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. He draws heavily in this section on the work of Christian ecotheologians Sallie McFague and Thomas Berry as

examples of modern 'creation-centered streams of thought' (p. 46). Evangelical Christians might remain unpersuaded by the modern theological interpretations of Sallie McFague and Thomas Berry, but by drawing from earlier Christian thinkers, he casts the net more broadly in making the case that Christians should care about climate change.

In the final chapter, 'Into the Darkness with Hearts Ablaze', Mastaler attempts to lay out in his own words 'a theology of mobilization, calling for Christians to live out a gritty kind of faith that arouses a deep love for the world and works to make justice happen' (p. xxi). Central to this is the ability of Christians to 'make peace with the evolutionary and ecological sciences', a tall order for many conservative Christians (p. 104).

This is both an academic text and an appeal to practical action. Mastaler, in drawing on a diverse body of literature in theology, environmental science, and ethics, provides an excellent introduction to the issues facing Christian environmental ethics. But his ultimate aim is to provoke a change of heart in his fellow Christians, which he states explicitly on a number of occasions. This is no mere monograph for him. As to whether he will be successful is something that is ultimately up to the reader, as he notes in the last chapter, writing: 'But does this mean we *will* act? No, unfortunately... I hope we act, but we will have to overcome the paralyzing effect that attends the realization of what is happening' (p. 105). This text is an excellent choice for seminary and graduate courses in environmental justice and could also be useful for undergraduates. Mastaler makes his argument succinctly and earnestly, while also synthesizing a great deal of the main literature in Christian ecotheology and environmental ethics.

Sarah Werner
Independent Scholar
sarahwern@gmail.com

References

- Dillard, Annie. 1998. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial).
Oelschlager, Max. 1994. *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).