

## Book Reviews

Cardinal Cahal B. Daly, *The Minding of Planet Earth* (Veritas Publications, 2004), pp. iv + 250. £14.95; \$19.95, ISBN 1-8539-05798.

Sallie McFague recently pointed out that humans are the only species on earth that could disappear tomorrow and no earthling would miss us except, perhaps, our pets; and even they, she adds, would soon get over us.

McFague, a theologian who has spent many years studying ecological issues from a Christian perspective, was merely pointing out a fact that for over four billion years, earth has functioned – and marvelously well at that – without us. The sad reality today is that it is the human, as Passionist priest and ecological guru, Thomas Berry once pointed out, that has devastatingly changed the chemistry, biosystems and even the geology of the planet and now we are even changing the ozone layer and bringing about global warming.

It is therefore in wonderment, but not without respect for his chutzpa, that we find Cardinal Cahal B. Daly, a former Irish Catholic primate, marching bluntly where many biblical scholars and eco-theologians have decided to tread delicately, and assigning humans the role of ‘masters’ of the world in his book, *The Minding of Planet Earth*.

The drawback in taking such an approach, in this day and age, is that the work runs the risk of becoming one more Christian apologetic on the environment that only confirms to some adherents what they already want to know and dissuades some critics from hearing what they ought to know.

And this is unfortunate given that Cardinal Daly’s aim was to stimulate reflection among Catholics, or in his words, ‘plea for unprejudiced dialogue’.

To be sure, his central message is undisputed and timely. He recognizes how we are destroying the earth and believes that humans must include ecological accountability into our daily lives.

This message is conveyed in the title itself, which, rather wittily, carries a double meaning. On the one hand, our ‘minding’ of the earth means that we care for it. Then again, ‘minding’ also implies that since God created nature intelligible to the human, rational mind, we, being created in God’s image and likeness, can find traces of God’s mind in the universe and ‘prudently manage’ God’s creation.

Essentially, Daly is pointing out – and spends the better part of his book doing so – that there is no fundamental opposition between science and faith and that indeed the two complement each other in the ‘minding’ of the Earth. Some of the regrettable past episodes in our church history that have challenged this notion, he writes, such as the condemnation of Galileo, were due to each party not respecting the limits of its own competence.

Ironically, it is in not assigning similar limits to the ability of humans, their rational minds and their scientific prowess to serve as minders of the earth where Daly’s work loses its veracity. By boldly assigning humans ‘mastery of the earth and conquest of the skies’, Daly overlooks the more nuanced interpretations of the biblical accounts of the human’s role in the world.

Although Daly does caution that humans are called to work in full conformity with God's design, he might have taken cues from more recent scholarship that discerns our ability to ever fully hope to do so as 'masters'. (He admits his inability to keep up on his reading due to pastoral concerns.)

For example, biblical scholar Othmar Keel, citing Psalm 104 and Job 38 as indispensable texts to be included in any ecological reading of the Bible, arrives at the conclusion that the world of the Bible is portrayed as being greater, larger and more complex than any world we can ever hope to understand.

The difficulty found in Daly's book, from an ecological stance, could very well be that it is not really about taking care of the environment but about taking care of the human. Major environmental hot topics, such as over-population, are merely referenced in a couple of paragraphs.

As a book on the destruction of fellow humans, the work fares better. Daly aptly depicts a pressing and moving picture of social injustices around the world and affirms the principles of Catholic social teaching that admonishes greed, selfishness and any demeaning of the dignity of human life. Any injustices that thwart this dignity, such as the build-up of greenhouse gases, must be put right.

As a book on ecology, the verdict is not so certain. Mere gainsay that Christianity is a fervent of ecological hope and that any problems merely come from poor interpretations of its tradition is unhelpful and not authentic to the reality that, on the whole, Christianity is deafeningly quiet on ecological issues. But, the Cardinal deserves kudos for writing on an issue that receives comparatively little notice among his peers.

Whether it will arouse dialogue is less certain. With all the complexity that surrounds this issue, merely exalting the human with more gusto calls to mind the popular cliché of a person who, while at first not succeeding in being understood by a foreign-speaking person, merely repeats the same message using the same language, only louder.

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Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. x + 311. \$26.00, ISBN 0-2311-2661-1.

In this well-written and robustly polemical book Lisa Sideris offers a Darwinian critique of ecological theologies. Her guiding assumption is that these theologies are inadequate as guides to the moral complexities of ecological crisis because they have not properly come to terms with the evolutionary perspective. Ecological theologians resist a Darwinian account of nature because of their preference for order over chaos, harmony over dissonance, and mutuality over competition. Sideris reviews the writings of Sally McFague, Michael Northcott, Rosemary Ruether, John Cobb, Jürgen Moltmann, Charles Birch and Larry Rasmussen and finds them all to a lesser or greater extent complicit in an anti-Darwinian stance. Commending an approach to the natural world which lauds community and peace over inter-species strife, these ecological theologians are too humanocentric in their view of nature. By imputing human desires for peace and justice into the natural world through the devices of covenantal or process theology, they neglect the Darwinian description of life on earth

as evolving through pain and suffering and the detritus of millions of wasted individuals and species which provide the biological foundations for life today.

Sideris finds evidence of humanocentrism in McFague's preference for the metaphor of the garden over wilderness, in Northcott and Ruether's advocacy of an ecological covenantal theology, in Birch and Cobb's account of the 'liberation of life' and in McFague, Birch and Cobb's claim that humans ought to treat animals as neighbours, and according to the same ethic of love which Christ commended to humans in his life on earth. As Sideris suggests, and Northcott does also, the idea that we should treat non-humans as proto-humans is highly problematic and does nothing to address the real character of human-nonhuman exchanges, nor the ways in which non-humans tend so often to come off worse in such encounters. According to Sideris, their preference for harmony over conflict makes of most ecological theologians romantics whose visions of nature owe more to human communitarianism than they do to the actual conditions under which life on earth evolves and continues to pursue its violent and competitive destiny. Part of the problem, Sideris argues, is that ecotheologians are attached to an outmoded account of the nature of ecosystems, of the kind advanced by Terence Odum in the 1950s, in which the internal balance of ecological systems and mutual relationships between resident species are privileged. But the current and regnant scientific metaphors of neo-Darwinians such as Richard Dawkins describe ecosystems as composites of millions of individual actions which are the outcome of the quests of millions of individuals of each species and billions of individual genes for survival.

Sideris is measured in her criticisms and acknowledges differences between her interlocutors where these exist. She, for example, notes with approval my own critique of the tendency of much ecological theology in North America to homogenize the human and nonhuman world through the embrace of pantheism and process theology. But ultimately she finds little of value, and much which is highly misleading, among the ecological theologians she reviews. She suggests instead that Holmes Rolston and James Gustafson are the most helpful guides to a Christian moral response to ecological crisis. Core to the accounts which they both give is the recognition that there is a radical conflict between the human good and the purposes of nature and that it is not possible to read off from the human encounter with the natural world any moral guidance in the matter of environmental dilemmas. Respect for natural processes, not romantic adulation of nature, is what they, and Sideris, commend. The way to a truer ecotheology is to embrace more rigorously the scientific description of the complexity, and even the apparent chaos, of biotic mechanisms. The theological and scientific basis for this embrace is recognition of the given order of evolved nature, and of creation as God-given. The strong pull towards animals and the wild which ecological theologians, like animal rights advocates, express is not wrong. Indeed Sideris commends a qualified ethic of love for nature but it is important that humans do not love nature as *themselves* but in its difference and otherness from the human.

There is much to commend in this admirably clear and readable book; the argument is punchy and incisive, and the expositions and critique do indeed identify significant weaknesses in much North American ecological theology. However there are significant problems with Sideris' approach as well for, like Rolston and Gustafson, she claims to have a privileged view of the true meaning of the creation which enables her, and they, to set aside key elements in the witness of scripture concerning creation's meaning and telos. Scripture is clear that nature is fallen and

incomplete and that it stands in need of redemption. Scripture is clear that the new creation represented by the Resurrected body of Christ, and by the Church, is an anticipation of the redemption of all created reality which is promised in the coming of the one in and through whom God created the world and intends to finally redeem it. Scripture is also clear that predation, while part of God's purposes for God's creatures, is nonetheless one of the key features of the natural world which God intends to redeem. Claiming to be theocentric, Sideris, like Rolston and Gustaffson, sets aside the witness of scripture and relies instead upon human experience of the natural world to explain the relationship of theism and nature. While this tendency to speak of God in general, rather than God as revealed in scripture and tradition, is a standard feature of much post-enlightenment theism, it is unfaithful to a Trinitarian theology which sees Christ not only as the creator of the world but as its redeemer and which therefore understands that creation is cruciform. Christians have no other foundation for narrating the meaning of God's creation than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now this is not to say that Christians need to deny the narratives of science where these have a firm empirical base. But it is to say that these narratives on their own cannot be sufficient guides to the meaning and purposes of the Triune God with regard to God's creatures.

The empirical bias of Sideris' approach is also manifest in her description of a qualified love ethic which relies much on human experience of wild animals and wild places, and in that respect is in accord with the North American wilderness tradition. However just as this placing of empirical experience above Christian tradition is unfaithful to the tradition, it also lacks a clear account of the forms of Christian witness to ecological redemption. It can for example offer little guide to the moral dilemmas of climate change or deforestation or over-fishing: hiving off parts of wild nature for conservation purposes fails to address the fundamental injustices which drive a global economic system, and which derogate the environments of billions of human as well as nonhuman individuals. Sideris also fails to acknowledge the ambiguity of the scientific quest to control nature, and of the tendency of scientific metaphors of control and domination to shape social reality, and relations between human and nonhuman nature. The modern corporation is in effect a social reification of Darwinism's guiding narrative of nature as 'red in tooth and claw'; it acts only in the interests of its own survival. Confronting this ontology of violence with the Christian tradition's alternative narrative of divinely originated peace and redemption is surely a core project of ecological theology.

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John E. Carroll, *Sustainability and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. x + 191. Paperback \$18.95, ISBN 0-7914-6178-5. Hardback \$51.50, ISBN 0-7914-6177-7.

While our increasing concern for the health of the planet has also been attended by a growing interest in both sustainable development and living, John E. Carroll notes that few people have actually shifted to sustainable practices. He argues that if we are to live in a sustainable fashion that is more ecologically oriented, then we would do well to consider at least three steps. Firstly, we need to convert from the dominant

paradigm of our culture to patterns of production and consumption that respect and safeguard all of the planet's systems and that adopt frugality as a central principle. Secondly, we must embrace the spiritual dimension of our beings that integrates us into the mystery and magnitude of creation. A narrow cosmological and spiritual vision permits ecological devastation by virtue of its limited horizon, he argues. And finally, we might examine existing exemplars of sustainable living to discern and follow their countercultural behaviours and the ways that they engage spiritual practices. Given these three parameters, it is not surprising that *Sustainability and Spirituality* recounts the alternative activities of many Christian religious communities, particularly those who live a monastic lifestyle, suggesting that the actions and commitments of these communities can provide us with inspiration and models for living more ecologically.

Carroll begins his text by examining principles of ecology and sustainable living, and considers how these might be related to a life of faith informed by religion. He provides examples of what he considers to be 'outstanding models of sustainability' that exemplify the previously articulated principles. Because many of these communities are significantly influenced by Thomas Berry's reflection on the new cosmology and its implications for the reinvention of human culture, Carroll then offers a brief overview of Berry's thought and the way various religious communities have embraced its values. Carroll recognizes that any spirituality that wants to inspire and inform more ecological practices will need to be compatible with the best scientific articulation of the day. Berry's work, and the way these communities have put it into action, bridges the old divide between science and faith and thereby manifests the very ecological integration that sustainable practices require.

Carroll pays particular tribute to the Sisters of Earth, an informal network of women who support one another in their efforts to address the current ecological and spiritual crisis. He notes the history of this organization and how the Sisters who sought to heal both the human spirit and Earth's ecosystems gradually discerned how they would 'walk the talk' of sustainable living within each of their own communities. The brief stories of how these communities brought an ecological ethic to the management of their lands, their buildings, their service to others, and to their daily living provide the reader with both a history of conversion and examples to follow.

Perhaps anticipating the often heard complaint that those who care for Earth seem to ignore the immediate and pressing plight of humans, Carroll examines the inseparable place of social justice within eco-justice. A spiritually-grounded version of sustainability would necessarily include both, he argues.

If humans are to adopt ways of being that are sustainable within Earth's ecosystems, then they will require models that guide and inspire conversion from our present ecologically destructive practices. *Sustainability and Spirituality* is replete with these examples, not only suggesting that change can occur but demonstrating how it has both happened and continues to thrive. And this is perhaps the greatest strength of the text—in times when news about the environment tends to be mostly negative, *Sustainability and Spirituality* provides good news stories that remind us of what is possible. It does not offer an in-depth analysis of the ecological crisis or a comprehensive consideration of the relationship among ecology, spirituality and sustainability. Nor does Carroll critically and closely examine any of the examples that he describes, eschewing a history of challenges faced and options considered, or a probing evaluation of decisions and outcomes. This type of analysis was apparently never the intent of the author. For educators who require examples of positive efforts to move toward

sustainable living that might interest an undergraduate student, or readers who seek some good news about the environment for a change, this well-written text provides the type of flowing narrative that both engages and satisfies.

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Sir Martin Rees, *Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future in this Century – On Earth and Beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. viii + 228. Paperback, \$15.00. ISBN 0-465-06863-4.

It has been said by some theologians that the apocalyptic pattern of thought is so pervasive in the Western world that it penetrates not only our ideological suppositions, but also our personal reactions, historical behavioral patterns, and even our communal identities. Given such a contention, perhaps it is not surprising to find a scientist—writing a secular book for a largely secular audience—who narrates the apocalyptic script with such faithful adherence to the rules of the genre. Just as more self-consciously religious apocalyptic literature anticipates a calamitous showdown between the forces of good and evil in which the annihilation of the world as we know it will be followed by a brave new creation, so Sir Martin Rees contends that 'the odds are no better than fifty-fifty that our present civilisation on Earth will survive to the end of the present century [because]...twenty-first century technology could jeopardise life's potential, foreclosing its human and posthuman future' (p. 8). For Rees, however, 'twenty-first century technology' not only is the tool of evildoers who, 'through malign intent, or through misadventure', might cause civilization as we know it to come to an end, but also the tool of our salvific heroes who, through self-sacrifice and with hopeful eyes toward the future, could rocket off into space where 'a potential future...could even be infinite' (p. 188).

Writing in easily accessible language appropriate for a general readership, Rees presents a nightmarish list of hazards that includes not only presently available dangers but also 'mega-terrors' that have not been invented yet. All-out nuclear war makes his list, but smaller-scale nuclear detonations or plutonium-coated dirty bombs also strike Rees as likely possibilities. Zealots infected with smallpox or with new designer viruses could trigger world-wide pandemics. Rising carbon dioxide levels could bring about increasingly severe patterns of global warming while the human population explosion could put such an untenable stress on natural resources that large scale human migrations and local and international resource-wars result. International tensions also could be triggered by future experiments in genetic engineering and biotechnology that create genetically advantaged children in rich nations and growing resentment in poor countries where the injustice of inequitable resource allocation already is keenly felt. On the other hand, destruction might come as a consequence of robots with human or greater-than-human intelligence and sensory awareness that replicate themselves and take over the world. Threats from machines also extend into the world of nanotechnology where self-replicating, miniaturized apparatuses could sustain themselves through the consumption of organic material, proliferating uncontrollably until all life on earth is devoured. But the destruction of

life might come, instead, through a mishap with a particle accelerator if concentrations of energy create black holes upon the earth's surface or split apart quarks that reform into novel and deadly configurations or rip apart space itself by forming vacuums in which no atom could exist.

Rees' book sometimes reads like a Chekhov play where the list of catastrophes proceeds with such spiraling intensity that the reader cannot help but occasionally laugh at the mounting tension and the vague sense that so many unmitigated and equally weighted disasters verge on the absurd. However, Rees isn't writing a Russian play, but rather an apocalyptic drama where, according to the rules of the category, fear must become transformed into hope. At first it appears that Rees grounds his hope in the possibility of human repentance. In my favorite passages, Rees offers helpful acts of contrition, such as a world-wide ban on nuclear testing and the cessation of US statements concerning the potential use of low-yield nuclear weapons. These acts could reduce international tensions and the need for foreign acquisition of nuclear weapons as deterrents against perceived US imperialism. A commitment to renewable energy, says Rees, might solve the problems of nuclear plant vulnerability, limited oil reserves, and global warming. But above all, contends Rees in some of his most impassioned passages, scientists should step out from behind their mask of objective indifference and take responsibility for their research, renouncing areas of exploration that have too large a potential down-side.

Yet Rees' call for redemptive conversion ultimately falters. Apocalyptic narratives generally follow one of two predictable patterns: either they utilize the prophetic voice to advocate social responsibility or they devolve into a fatalism that seeks to flee finitude into a realm of super-natural transcendence. At first, Rees appears to have embraced the prophetic call to transformative action, but he soon reveals that he has little faith in human competence or good-will and instead believes that we must establish extra-terrestrial outposts if we are to have any real hope of long-term survival. Given Rees' position as England's Astronomer Royal, perhaps it is understandable that he turns to the heavens for a solution to our earthly problems, but it is disappointing nonetheless. Expectations, after all, attempt to materialize themselves and expectations of the end of the world generally materialize themselves in world-wasting habits. Rees bemoans this tendency within religious fundamentalism, but appears blinded to the possibility that secular apocalyptic scripts also might function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Envisioning ourselves free of the contingencies of earthly materiality and finitude allows us to imagine earth as expendable. Indeed, even the human body appears to be expendable in Rees' vision, for the outer reaches of space may be so inhospitable, he says, that only machines equipped with downloaded human thoughts and memories may be able to survive. But such a vision of lifeless life is little more than a fevered dream of relentless annihilation. If 'life comes first' (p. 127), as Rees contends, then we must recognize that life exists only in its multi-specied variety, making us vulnerable to the fragilities of the planet that gave us birth and the contingencies of local and international communities that sustain us. It is only when we accept our utter dependence on these multiple interrelationalities that we can affirm life and in so doing form the only genuine basis of action against the end of the world.

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