
For the Christian environmental ethicist confronting so-called “green fatigue” in the American public, and vigorous debate within the environmental movement over the role and priority of personal versus corporate/governmental ecological responsibility, Laura Ruth Yordy’s “Green Witness” is a rich and thought-provoking addition to ecotheology. Yordy describes her book as a “boldly apologetic” (20) work of “constructive theology” (9). She taps an array of classical Christian traditions, contemporary Christian theologians, eco-theologians, and environmentalists, and uses them imaginatively to develop her thesis, that “the church’s most faithful mode of response to ecological issues is through Christian witness to the Kingdom of God” (9).

In chapter 1, Yordy identifies several factors behind “the limp response” of U.S. churches to urgent environmental challenges, and returns to one in particular throughout the book: the idea that ecological problems are either too monumental to be solved by mere mortals, or that they can ultimately be solved by human technology. Both of these responses imply that the success or failure of human effort determines the fate of the environment, putting God in a subordinate role. Yordy also describes a radical change in the modern Christian conception of the Kingdom of God, in which the Kingdom came to be thought of as a “human project”—its realization a function of human “efficacy and expertise” (17)—rather than the fulfillment of God’s promise. In Yordy’s analysis, this is a misconception that either translates into misguided efforts to “manage” environmental problems through science, politics and economics, or leads us to despair and resignation. Once again, either of these responses implies “that we are beyond any dependence on God…” The appropriate response, the ultimate focus of Yordy’s book, is “faithful obedience,” living in witness to “the good news” that “the Kingdom has already been inaugurated and will be consummated in God’s own time” (18). She will show that eco-discipleship is an integral aspect of this response. She distinguishes her apologetic approach from well-known revisionist approaches by Larry Rasmussen, Catherine Keller, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. This discussion is necessarily brief—perhaps too brief to do them justice—but highlights
the unique contributions of each, while calling attention to the ways in which their more universalist aims require “blurring the particularity of Christian doctrine and discipleship.”

Yordy’s second chapter describes a trinitarian doctrine of creation. She disputes the idea of a “common creation story” in general, and notes that for Christians in particular, the creation story is necessarily an account of “God’s activity for, and in, the world through Jesus Christ” (45). For Christians, “creation is eschatological . . . a universe of things and subjects and processes and relations all on their way to unity in God” (53). There are, to be sure, many models of creation in Christian theology, but Yordy identifies “broad agreement” on key elements: God creates in perfect freedom, in loving generosity, in relationality (in the Trinity), continuously, and ex nihilo (out of nothing). Creation in all its diversity and particularity reflects the infinite goodness of the Trinity. There may be less agreement on the particulars of “the Fall,” but Yordy suggests broadening the definition of “fallen” to ask simply “whether creation is other than it should be, disordered, less than ideal, or contrary to God’s purpose and plan” (73). Creation reflects the goodness of its Creator, but is simultaneously disordered and corrupt, and can only be restored by its Creator. “As a result, the extent to which the current natural order can function as normative is limited,” and she discourages Christians from attempting “to infer moral order from empirical observation of human and/or nonhuman life” (78). But “God’s creation is suffused with purpose and promise” (79) and all creation glorifies God. Throughout this chapter, Yordy deftly highlights the ways in which Christians have inappropriately set humanity apart from the rest of the created order, allowing this separation to justify “uncharitable behavior toward our fellow creatures” (53).

In chapter 3, Yordy elaborates her vision of ethics as witness, and draws more explicit connections to eco-discipleship. To witness fully, Christians must understand the promises of the Kingdom, “expressed by the prophets and testified to by Jesus:” peace, justice, liberation, reconciliation, abundance, righteousness, and eternal communion with God for all creation. Knowledge is gained through praxis (following Jesus and practicing eco-discipleship), and through personal, communal, and ecological memory. Witness, then, entails “proclamation and demonstration, preaching and doing . . .” (109). It is an “ethic of response’ to God’s grace . . .” (109).