
For many who will read *An Ethics of Biodiversity* the answer to the question, “Should biodiversity be conserved?” is obvious—you! Yet, many Christians do not share that same affirmation, at least explicitly. Throughout this book O’Brien seeks to demonstrate that biodiversity should be of moral significance to Christians, which subsequently demands an appropriate moral response. In articulating his response, O’Brien asks five questions: What is biodiversity? Why does it matter? How should we pay attention to it? How should we conserve it? What does the conservation of biodiversity have to do with human diversity and with social justice (13)?

One of the strengths of this book is O’Brien’s belief that the natural sciences and Christian theology can work together in setting out the parameters for the discussion about biodiversity. In defining biodiversity and explaining why we should pay attention to it in parts one and two of the book, he explicates both scientific definitions as well as a host of possible Christian ones. In particular, building upon a previous definition from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, O’Brien contends that biodiversity can be defined as “the variety of creatures in God’s creation that manifests God’s glory” (25). Ultimately he maintains that biodiversity must matter to us for moral reasons since the alleviation of species loss requires a radical change of human behavior, which necessitates a moral response. His constructive answer is to change Christian thinking on the subject by emphasizing the essential sacramental claim of biodiversity: “it helps us to understand God” (64). Relying on scholars as varied as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Sallie McFague, O’Brien builds a compelling case that the richness of life on earth can teach us something about the one who created it. Moreover, he goes on to assert that humans must exhibit a particular type of humility in order to appreciate this biodiversity, which subsequently should lead to the suitable moral response to conserve it.

In part three, O’Brien looks at the conservation problem of scale. Should conservation efforts be focused primarily at the local, regional, national, or international levels? He then moves on to show three different Christian approaches to this issue as he seeks to discern the complexities of a multi-scalar Christian ecological ethic. Part four contains a review of the U.S. Endangered Species Act and its impact on the last forty years of American environmental politics and attitudes toward conservation. Here he returns to his central thesis, moral formation is needed if people are to exhibit different behavior than what see in a developed world nation like the United States today. In Christian communities then he proposes these three examples of moral formation: ritual blessings of animals (primarily pets), scriptural interpretation of the Noah’s ark narrative, and a better theological analysis of the concept of dominion. Lest one think that he is only concerned about changing attitudes, he exhorts the reader at the end of this section to remember, “Moral formation requires political expression, and
politics requires a moral public. Neither approach to conservation is enough on its own” (147).

The book’s final part takes up the delicate balance between preserving biodiversity and cultural diversity, as he reminds us that there are many other extremely important social and environmental challenges to be met. This leads O’Brien in the last chapter to put the ethics of biodiversity in dialogue with the concerns of liberation theology, specifically as expressed by James Cone, Leonardo Boff, and Ivone Gebara. It is here that we are reminded that the care of the poor and voiceless of the planet goes immediately alongside those who literally have no voice at all.

One of the primary goals of O’Brien’s book is to change the way that we think and act toward the various creatures that live on our planet. He perhaps stimulates the reader to think most differently in his section on sacramentality. While sacramentality may be “old news” to Roman Catholics, this notable insight into a Christian ethic of biodiversity to a Protestant like me is potent. Adapting John Hart’s idea of a “sacramental consciousness,” O’Brien implores us to recognize that “the degradation of the natural environment is a sin against God and a depletion of [one’s] ability to know God” (61). The idea that the natural environment is a vehicle of divine grace and thus knowledge about God, I believe, is a powerful starting point on the path toward a Christian ethic of biodiversity because it allows Christians to see non-human creatures in a new light that ultimately affects the human relationship with God. Moreover, O’Brien’s subsequent contention that the moral call of sacramentality is to humility is equally cogent as it reminds humans of our particular plight—we are destroying some species before we even have knowledge of their existence.

While this book does well to give us the framework for which questions need more work as we search for an ethic of biodiversity, as the reader, I wished O’Brien had explicated his own thought more explicitly on at least three key points. First, after examining the approaches of Larry Rasmussen, John Hart, and Michael Northcott on the question of scale in ecological ethics, O’Brien spends only one paragraph briefly stating that he generally sides with Hart. After demonstrating the depth of this problem, I found myself unsatisfied with such a brief conclusion, especially since the thrust of his argument is that moral formation and political expression go hand in hand. Second, as mentioned above, in his section on moral formation O’Brien looks briskly at ritual blessings of animals, a scriptural interpretation of Noah’s ark, and a theological analysis of dominion. I did not find myself disagreeing with anything in these short sections, but once again, I was left wanting more insight from him on these potentially important avenues of thought. Third, while O’Brien should be lauded for selecting three prominent liberation theologians to serve as interlocutors for an ethic of biodiversity, I failed to understand precisely what the reader is to glean from the conversation other than there is much more careful work to be done in this area.

In the end, this book provides the reader with a full look at the vast landscape of this new challenge for Christian ecological ethics and identifies the various points that need much more detailed discussion both in the academy and in