Book Review

Christof Hardmeier and Konrad Ott


Should secular nature ethics, relevant and open for all environmentally committed citizens, enter a dialogue with religion? If so, what might Jewish-Christian beliefs in nature as creation contribute? How will such a dialogue enhance a new nonviolent rereading of the biblical story of creation? How can nature ethics and creation beliefs cross-fertilize?

Swiss-German scholar of Old Testament Christof Hardmeier and prominent German environmental philosopher Konrad Ott have treated these questions at depth in a series of seminars and present their findings in a thorough German language monograph, which is grounded in the hermeneutical theory and method of a pragmatic bible reading and an environmental ethics anchored in discourse ethics. In what one might label as an ongoing “post-secular” turn in late modernity, where worldviews and spiritual driving forces for social action are attracting increasing awareness, such a project comes to pass right in time. Following the path of Jürgen Habermas’ communicative social philosophy the authors attempt their task as a “project of translation” which they carefully substantiate and explain in the first chapter.

I try to condense their ambitious project in four points. Bridging the gap between creation belief and nature ethics takes place as:

a) a project of re-reading and re-thinking the biblical story in the horizon of our environmental challenge,

b) translating this interpretation in a way that makes it relevant for nature ethics,

c) questioning secular nature ethics *etsi deus non daretur* (as if God does not exist) and deepening it with insights about significant motivations within moralities,
and finally d) developing a fusion of horizons where biblical and secular perspectives connect to each other in a way that both keep their internal logic intact but open up for co-thinking and co-acting for the best of our common future and Earth.

The handling of the “precariousness” of human life is regarded as central by the authors, as this impacts directly on human skills to perceive and preserve nature instead of violating it. Self awareness of irresponsibility and sinfulness grows out of the consciousness of these precarious life conditions in dialogue with biblical creation belief as well as the capacity to mobilize radical hope and to experience and cultivate situations of happiness as sources for transformation (for example with regard to respond to climatic change and geopolitical injustice). Sabbath rest offers a life enhancing space for experiencing the freedom from business-dominated modes of time use. Biblically based love to peace furthermore offers significant social springs to countervail a dominant culture of hatred and violence that has already been so excellently investigated in its roots in the Genesis story of Cain. In the center of the authors’ thinking one finds the often and in many contexts repeated “and he saw that it was very good!” which Hardmeier translates into the moving formula Da! Sehr gut! (There! Very good!) (Genesis 1:31a). The act of perceiving nature as a created gift coram Deo (in the face of God) flows into the attitude of humble respect and admiration that again flows into the practice of sharing and preserving, among believers as well as others.

In six chapters Hardmeier and Ott share with us the best of their exegetical and philosophical skills, and the book therefore also serves for the reader as a well informed, rich survey and diving trip into the study of the creation story of Genesis and the overarching field of environmental ethics. Misreadings of the creation belief as a mission of dominion or a simple hierarchy of creatures with man at the top are likewise critiqued and rejected as a virtue based or eudaimonic environmental ethics. Clear arguments for nature conservation in general as well as its urgent mandate for believers are worked out in detail. Discourse ethics, which unfortunately has not yet fully mobilized its potentials for environmental ethics, is developed in this book, and for that matter in Ott’s other works as well, as a highly valuable and useful theory and method to entangle social and environmental ethics. The authors’ thesis is without doubt evident and needs to be constantly reflected anew: “The precarious peace with nature presupposes the precarious peace among humans” (309). This echoes, by the way, the insight of Swedish feminist and ecologist Elin Wägner formulated in her famous 1940 book, Peace with the Earth.

Religion works in this book mainly as a synonym for the management of contingency, and even if the authors take a critical stance to reductionist cognitive-