

*Earthkeeping in the 90s:
Stewardship of Creation*
Loren Wilkinson, ed.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. ISBN 0-8028-0534-5 (pbk), \$19.95.

Stewardship & the Economy of God
by John Reumann

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992. ISBN 0-8028-0653-8 (pbk), \$12.95.

Christians have been on the defensive since Lynn White charged that Christianity was the source of environmental problems.¹ Since then, a spate of books and articles has appeared—some with the goal of refuting the charges, others to engage in obsequious acts of contrition, while still others have attempted seriously to examine environmental issues from a Christian perspective. Both of the books reviewed here fit into this last category, although Reumann’s book is not actually an environmental book. I suspect that most Christian economists will be more interested in *Earthkeeping*, although I also suspect that those who obtain both books will find they turn to Reumann’s book more often in the years ahead.

*Earthkeeping in the 90s*² is a revision of a 1980 book produced by an interdisciplinary group of scholars at the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship. Since I never read the first edition, I cannot provide information about the differences. According to the preface, the new edition corrects, amplifies, and updates the original, and also takes into consideration many changes over the previous decade. These changes include concern over the “greenhouse effect,” the Valdez oil spill and the reactor failure at Chernobyl, and popularization of the Gaia hypothesis.

The goal of the work is to encourage what the authors call “earthkeeping.” This term is “...intended to evoke ‘housekeeping’—and through the word ‘house’ (which is *oikos* in Greek) the crucial connection between ‘economy’ and ‘ecology.’ For it is the household or *oikoumene* of creation which we children of Adam are called to ‘keep’—with all the watchful care that the word can evoke.” (*Earthkeeping*, p. x). The argument

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of the book is that earthkeeping is the task given to humanity by God, and that we are accountable to God for the way in which we keep the earth.

After an introductory section, the book is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the problem, listing and describing the ecological problems of the earth today, and is familiar to anyone who has read recent works by environmentalists. The second section, which makes up over forty percent of the book, discusses the historical roots and current attitudes towards earthkeeping. The third section attempts to provide a Biblical approach to the topic, and the final section provides twenty guidelines to help us in our task of earthkeeping.

The first half of the long second section examines "historical roots." Key ideas of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans as related to nature are introduced, discussed and contrasted. The ideas are judged by whether nature is esteemed for its own sake or not, and whether humanity is given too low or too high a consideration. Given the richness of early Greek thought, it is not surprising that the authors of *Earthkeeping* find ideas that are compatible with their approach, as well as ideas that are not.

The authors find the medieval view of nature is more compatible with their viewpoint, especially as expressed in the mystical writings of Celtic Christians and in St. Francis of Assisi. The hope that Francis' approach might have become dominant was thwarted by the appearance of the scientific revolution. This rise of science was encouraged by devotion to the Creator, but soon moved away from its source. Nature is demoted by Descartes' separation of mind and body, and Bacon's inductive method is used to manipulate and control nature. The consequence is humanity's alienation from creation.

The environmental movement is then discussed as part of a search for a new religion. Deep ecology, the Gaia Hypothesis, and the interest in eastern religions

are discussed. The authors are too committed to an orthodox Christian view of the world to accept the conclusions of most of these movements, but they find helpful ideas in many of them. A typical example of their discussion is, "The religious conclusion drawn by contemporary Gaia-worshippers is the wrong one, but the evidence prompting it deserves to be taken seriously" (p. 185). Similarly, ecofeminist thought, which argues that there are hints of an early age when society valued women's insights more and society was less exploitative, is rejected, but, "The ecofeminist argument should not be ignored" (p. 194).

Earthkeeping then turns to economics and commerce as "...the means through which we most clearly impose our values and beliefs on the creation..." (p. 199). The authors argue that there are two contrasting models that dominate thought in North America today—a model of the frontier and a model of spaceship earth. The model of the frontier encourages the use of resources indiscriminately, while the spaceship model encourages restraint and sustainability. The frontier model has incorporated a Utilitarian attitude, which ties value to the satisfaction of wants and desires. After an excursus into the history of thought that returns to Plato and Aristotle, and moves to today through the Reformation, Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, and Smith, *Earthkeeping* turns to a more extensive discussion of value.

Earthkeeping argues that creation is good, and that God placed men and women within creation and with a specific role—to act as stewards of God's creation. The task of valuing is part of this responsibility. But what principles should be used in valuation? Three possibilities are mentioned—subjective valuation, usefulness for human purposes, and intrinsic value—and all are found, "...deficient by Christian standards." They continue, "The missing element is transcendence: valuing of the creation ought to be grounded in the Creator's norms." Anything less than this

is inadequate, and clearly the economist's method of valuation is less than this.

Section III develops the Biblical support for *Earthkeeping's* views on the care of creation. The major topics of this section are dominion, stewardship, creation, and justice. Dominion is seen as stewardship. It is interpreted with respect to the incarnation, and as including the idea of servanthood. The authors write, "...as far as stewardship is concerned, the human distinctive is *accountability* to the Creator" (p. 312).

The final section of the book provides twenty guidelines for being earthkeepers. These guidelines are supposed to stem from Biblical principles concerning stewardship that begin with God as Creator, the idea that the creation is good, humanity's relationship to God and creation, and redemption in Christ. The twenty guidelines do not offer specific guidance in concrete situations, although more specific hints are given in a couple of the appendices.

There are a number of positive things about this book. A Christian perspective is maintained throughout. Even when the authors discuss eastern religions or neo-pagan ideas, they carefully critique them from a Christian perspective. They carefully maintain both God's transcendence and immanence, rather than moving towards the pantheism that often accompanies concentration on immanence. The discussion of the interrelations between dominion, stewardship and justice is relevant and important. However, I found most of the arguments in *Earthkeeping* unpersuasive. *Earthkeeping* relies too much on the history of ideas and the role of ideas in shaping behavior, rejects economic analysis too easily, and holds a view of human nature that is too optimistic.³

Much of *Earthkeeping* deals with ideas, often philosophical ideas. The long second section is a historical review of ideas and a discussion of the ideas underlying modern society. The solution to ecological problems is to have different ideas—instead of

viewing creation as an object to be dominated, one should view creation as God's gift to be nurtured. There is no discussion or evidence presented that these ideas, which tend to be held by intellectuals, actually influence the behavior of people. Does the fact that Descartes separated mind and nature induce the fisherman to throw his beer can in the lake? One can almost come away with the idea that if Descartes had never lived, we would be keeping the earth better than we are. But, broad views of humanity or nature don't always yield a singular mode of behavior either. For example, the view that matter is evil and the soul is good produced both ascetics and libertines in the early church period.

Although *Earthkeeping* focuses on ideas, the ideas are not those of economists. A fundamental weakness of the book is the dismissal of economic analysis. The authors argue that scarcity is not the foundation of economics; rather, stewardship is. We are entrusted with the care and use of creation and ought to economize as a part of our duty. An example is offered: Two payment methods could be used in a cafeteria line—one all-you-can-eat and the other *à la carte*. Standard economic analysis predicts people would behave differently under the two systems, with more "economical" eating when *à la carte* is used. They argue that this is because, "...we have adopted the scarcity mentality: no scarcity, no economizing" (p. 241). They continue:

Contrast this with the entrustedness view of the same choice: if it is God's creation—here in the form of food—shouldn't wise and frugal use of it, as a response to the Creator, follow regardless of how we are paying? (p. 241).

The "tragedy of the commons" is dismissed as irrelevant—people shouldn't treat common-property resources the way they do.

I find the above reasoning woefully inadequate. The analysis of common

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property arrangements explains what people do; the explanation doesn't cause the behavior. Aristotle was no neoclassical economist, but he recognized that people naturally exercise more care over the things they own than they do over things owned in common. Recent work by "free market environmentalists" suggests that, instead of dismissing market arrangements, earthkeeping would be enhanced by a greater reliance on market arrangements.⁴

The view of human nature in *Earthkeeping* is overly optimistic, which perhaps explains why the emphasis is on philosophy rather than on economics. The authors view humanity as fallen, but the Fall does not prevent all from exercising proper care of creation. People can still get their thinking straight and behave as stewards should behave. But certainly the Christian doctrine of the Fall suggests that this approach is too optimistic, and that policies that rest on it are doomed to fail. People shouldn't steal, but we still put locks on our houses. People shouldn't overuse common property, but they do, so privatization may often protect the property more effectively.

Finally, I was bothered by the constant use of "we" in the book. Just one example: "But for millions of acres of cropland in North America we have the choice. Do we grow crops for food or crops for feed?" (p. 55). Who makes up the "we" here? Are they talking about individuals, society as a whole, Christians, government, or some other group? My guess is that the use of "we" throughout ties in with the emphasis on ideas and their view of human nature. Hence, they conclude that if "we" just change "our" thinking, everything will be better. The approach I would argue for—analysis of different institutional arrangements as suggested by Coase⁵—is alien to the approach in *Earthkeeping*.

The authors of *Earthkeeping* could have benefited from reading Reumann's book on stewardship. Reumann takes the Greek word *oikonomia* and traces out its usage in

scripture, the early church, and the church in later years. He demonstrates that the word has (or had) a much wider range of meaning than often thought. In fact, Reumann's use of the term is broader than that used in *Earthkeeping*.

Reumann lists four uses of the term in non-Biblical Greek writings. *Oikonomia* referred to household management, management of the city-state (*polis*), the idea of arrangement, especially a logical as distinct from chronological arrangement, and administration of the universe. "God was viewed as 'administrator' managing the affairs of human beings and the whole universe in such a way as to fit the divine design and will" (*Stewardship*, p. 15). He then shows how Biblical usage of the term illustrates all four uses mentioned. An important example is Paul's use of the term to refer to being stewards of the mysteries of God, and of himself as a minister in accordance with the *oikonomia* of God, the economy of God.

Usage of *oikonomia* extended further in the patristic writings. Early Christians applied the concept to how God had arranged our salvation through Christ. In fact, the Greek term *he oikonomia* came to mean the incarnation of Christ. "This event was viewed as the supreme example of divine arrangement..." (p. 27). Other usages included a distinction between the economic Trinity and the essential Trinity, administration of the sacraments, providence in the life of the Christian, and, "It is with regard to history that one of the more important patristic concepts of God's guidance for the world's affairs arose. It involves what C.A. Patrides has called 'the grand design'" (p. 113).

Much of *Stewardship* develops the idea of God's administration of history. Three approaches to understanding how God works in history towards a goal have been developed—one that focuses on the beginning (God works towards a goal), another on the middle (God works towards a goal) and the third on the end (God works towards a goal). The first approach

combines the idea of stewardship with the history of salvation and humanity's role in the economy of God. The approach that focuses on the middle is an approach that includes ideas of creation and stewardship. This is the way the concept is used in *Earthkeeping*. The final approach concerns the future, and can be described as apocalyptic. Reumann argues that apocalyptic thought, "...adds a dimension to the two types of stewardship discussed above rather than presenting a third" (p. 113).

In the final chapter Reumann tries to tie everything together. He reiterates ten points that were established in earlier chapters, and relates a broad notion of stewardship to redemption and creation. He states:

Therefore it is the continuum of creation and redemption, with their pointers to and promise of a future consummation—the whole picture of beginning, middle, and end—that provides the basis for Christian living and thinking and therefore for stewardship. But we must ask, Whose stewardship?

The somewhat unexpected Biblical testimony is to God's stewardship, first and foremost, rather than ours. It is an economy of God, God's administration of the divine will, the work of God (p. 118).

As should be obvious from this brief summary, there is little in this book concerning what economists do. The book is a theological book. However, I found the work interesting, and some of the ideas challenging. It's a little humbling to think that the term "economy" can refer to the Trinity or to God's plan of salvation. Certainly this book is not for all economists, even Christian economists. But, the economist who enjoys word studies and examining ways to stretch concepts will find *Stewardship & the Economy of God* of great interest.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lynn White, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (1967).
- 2 I will refer to this book as *Earthkeeping* and to Reumann's book as *Stewardship*.
- 3 Another problem, but one I don't have space to develop, is a tendency to engage in eisegesis rather than exegesis.
- 4 See Terry L. Anderson and Donald R. Leal, *Free Market Environmentalism* (San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1991) and Robert Taylor, "Economics, Ecology, and Exchange: Free Market Environmentalism," *Humane Studies Review*, 8 (Fall 1992), pp. 1-8 for examples.
- 5 R.H. Coase, "The Problem of Social Cost," *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 3 (October 1960), pp. 1-44. ■

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