

Steven Bouma-Prediger

Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Virtue Ethic

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In my experience teaching ecological ethics, students are ready to accept that the subject is crucially important to the world. They have grown up with news of extreme weather events, loss of habitat and species, and environmental injustices and they are open to learning about the issues. However, I find it much more of a challenge to convince them that the topic is immediately relevant to their lives. Even as students recognise that environmental issues are important, many continue to approach them as an abstraction. They have learned from the broader culture to treat their economic future, their identities and their social lives as personal, but not climate change and pollution.

In *Earthkeeping and Character*, Steven Bouma-Prediger demonstrates the potential of virtue ethics in making environmental ethics relatable. The book emphasises the importance of personal and concrete stories in the formation, testing and living of moral principles, and offers numerous examples of how people taking these issues seriously make real changes in their own lives. With a wide array of sources, the book helps readers understand that our own lives impact the environment and are impacted by environmental degradation. Many of Bouma-Prediger's stories come from his own teaching and the college students he works with, and so this book will be a useful resource in college classrooms like my own. But he also uses narratives from the Bible, literature, and the history of environmental movements, and so this will also be a great text for community groups and adult learners who seek to understand environmental ethics.

Bouma-Prediger is a prominent Protestant Christian thinker on environmental issues, and this book continues arguments he has been building for many years that Christians in our time are called to actively care for the earth and that Christian traditions offer a wealth of resources with which to do so.

Earthkeeping and Character builds those arguments by emphasising the importance of the virtue tradition and is, first and foremost, an introduction to that tradition. The book defines a virtue as 'a story-shaped, praiseworthy character trait formed by practices over time that disposes us to act in certain ways' (p. 17). From this definition, Bouma-Prediger explores the ecological implications of eight virtues: wonder, humility, self-control, wisdom, justice, love, courage and hope. Each of the central chapters in the book introduces two of these virtues with an engaging story, defines them in dialogue with philosophical and theological sources, relates to Biblical teachings and stories, and finds examples of their enactment in a key environmental figure. This structure allows Bouma-Prediger to work carefully with traditional ideas while emphasising what is most relevant and relatable. For example, he cites Aristotle and

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Aquinas on temperance, but refers to the virtue with the more relatable term 'self-control' and then connects it to Susan Drake Emmerich's work building community between environmentalists and island residents in a Chesapeake Bay fishery. Such connections make the book an accessible, intriguing and excellent introduction to ecological virtue ethics.

Bouma-Prediger is very clear that his approach to virtue ethics is based in Christian faith, and rightly presents the clarity of that background as a strength of the book: 'there is no ethic from nowhere. Every ethic is rooted in a particular religious or philosophical perspective of some sort. I wish to be clear about mine' (p. 24). The most natural audience for the book will be Christians who share the author's assumptions about the importance of Christian tradition and Biblical narratives in nurturing 21st-century virtues. Indeed, this book makes the clearest case I know of that Christians should embrace ecological virtue ethics.

However, Bouma-Prediger also makes a strong case that non-Christians have much to learn from Christian ecological virtue ethics, and so engages in a dialogue with secular and philosophical virtue ethics. For example, he notes that discussions of hope are 'noticeably absent in much of the environmental virtue ethics literature', and urges other virtue ethicists to consider how imagining and living into a better future can be a vital ecological virtue (p. 119). I am certain that many will disagree that hope is an important virtue, or that hope is inadequately explored in secular philosophy, but such critics owe Bouma-Prediger a meaningful response to his case that Christian sources offer distinctive contributions to the discussion.

In my view, the greatest strength of *Earthkeeping and Character* is the breadth of its sources, as Bouma-Prediger emphasises that virtues are formed by learning from and acting on diverse ideas and examples. In addition to philosophy, theology, Biblical interpretation and personal experiences, he reflects on student experiences in the Adirondacks and in Belize; he cites the work of John Muir, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard and Wangari Matthai; he references *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Jayber Crow* and *Harry Potter*; he learns from Jane Goodall and Desmond Tutu and a family of locally-focused environmentalists in British Columbia. Almost any reader will find both familiar sources to connect with and new sources worth further investigation. This develops a broad, accessible approach to ecological virtue ethics.

My only criticism of the book is that it does not spend substantial time with sources that explicitly come from other religious worldviews. As someone who agrees with Bouma-Prediger that people of diverse faiths and no faith have much to learn from the Christian tradition, I think the argument would be better made if it also included examples of how Christians can reciprocally learn from other traditions. So, I would have appreciated the book also engaging in dialogue with Islamic and Buddhist sources on virtue, and with philosophical arguments that virtue is best understood in secular rather than

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religious contexts. But, of course, no book can do everything, and I remain impressed by the range of sources Bouma-Prediger synthesises and the sophistication of his argument for ecological virtue ethics.

Those of us who teach about the vital importance of environmental issues at global and personal scales have a resource in virtue ethics, which encourages people to take responsibility for their habits and the impact of those habits on the wider world. Steven Bouma-Prediger's *Earthkeeping and Character* offers an excellent introduction to this approach. May it be widely read!

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