

A review of *God's Earth: religion as if matter really mattered* by Paul Collins. - North Blackburn : Dove Books, 1995,

reviewed by Brian McKinlay

In *God's Earth*, Paul Collins begins from a conviction that humankind is unconscionably and disastrously destroying the earth and its living environment. He asserts that religion will no longer exist if the natural world continues to be devastated in this way. "Fundamentally", Collins writes, "this book is about the world, God, ecology and us, and the profound interconnections between all four." ^(p.2) In a world where nature is driven out, we will lose touch with the possibility for culture, religion and spirituality. ^(p.4)

Collins criticises anthropocentrism - assignment of absolute priority to the human - as the great failing of our religious traditions. We are more likely to encounter God's presence in the natural world than in the Bible or in human institutions, he argues. ^(p.10) This implies change in our understanding of the nature of God and the theology of revelation. "My ultimate purpose...", he says, "is to try to discover something of the transcendent presence that stands behind the natural world and the cosmos, and which alone gives meaning to all of creation." ^(p.11) This book is not a discussion of ecology as such and offers little evidence of humankind's impact on the environment. However, there is a long discussion of the principal agent of that impact - population growth. The attitudes and thinking of the Roman Catholic church in particular on population and fertility control are debated and severely criticised. ^(p.39ff)

Collins finds roots of anthropocentrism in Western culture and in Biblical interpretation. The so-called modern era has been characterised in the West by vision of limitless progress and continuing development - with huge impact on the biosphere. Post-modernism has brought no relief, as it denies the possibility of general moral or ethical norms which might be utilised to value the natural world.

Many writers have found Biblical encouragement for a view sympathetic to ecology, but Collins is more cautious. Though he takes account

of texts positive towards God's creation¹, he believes that Christianity is yet to overcome the imperative found in the creation texts for men (*not* women) to dominate and rule over the natural realm.² Surveying the history of Christian thought on nature and the physical realm, Collins finds the dominant paradigm to have been dualistic, with the material world set apart from God's kingdom and the realm of the spirit.^(pp.96ff) The historical survey is complemented by a study of influential contemporary thinkers. In Collins's view, Thomas Berry of Harvard University is the most important contemporary thinker on ecological theology.^(pp.150-163)

Reading this book, I frequently asked, "But what about ... ?", only to find my question addressed later in the book. Collins is well aware of questions his views may raise in the mind of the reader. For example: he declares that our responsibility, knowing our impact on the environment, is to be converted. We must experience a radical change from a human focus to interconnectedness with the natural realm. "What of the role of the deity in all this?", I thought, only to find, a few pages later, a discussion of the kind of God which could save us in response to such a conversion. This is neither the God of modern physics, Collins argues^(pp.191ff), nor the Protestant Barthian God, nor a God argued from design. Rather, the God that will save us is the God whose mysterious presence is found and symbolised in nature.

This discussion made me uncomfortable. In much of the book, God seems to be more a construct of human thought than one who is to be discovered or is self-revealing. Yet Collins does not ignore the revelation of God's self in Jesus Christ, devoting his final chapter to the place of Jesus.^(pp231ff) He takes issue with the strength of the dichotomy drawn by Berry and others between the historical Jesus and the cosmic Christ. The incarnation of Christ is an exemplar of God's involvement in and commitment to the natural world and its ultimate redemption or re-creation. However, Collins finds the natural world to be the pre-eminent place where God may be found. "I find myself

¹ E.g. Romans 8:22-23, Colossians 1:15-17

² Genesis:26-28, Genesis 2:19

dissatisfied with christology", he says, " and far more preoccupied with the search for God in the world that I do with the quest for Jesus".^(p.244)

Much of this book is an informative survey of the development (for good or ill) of Christian thought concerning the natural world. The high place Collins accords the natural world as a source of revelation and knowledge of God necessarily has far reaching implications for his christology and his theology of revelation. But the subject and size of the book does not afford a complete consideration of either. Collins describes some of his personal encounter with God through nature and briefly refers to Christian mysticism. But he does not consider in any depth other pathways of God's revelation and the Christian's personal encounter with God. He takes almost no account of prayer, for example. A case for the natural world as the pre-◆minent source of God's self-revelation is not sustained without a more complete consideration of such other possibilities.

Collins asserts that if we are deprived of the natural world, we humans will lose the opportunity of spiritual encounter, for nature is the source of our human origins and ongoing evolution.^(p.4) To view God as king and Lord reinforces a view of man as ruler over nature and is unsympathetic to an ecological perspective, he believes. Nevertheless, to me the God of the Christian is a God who is creator, purposeful and ultimately sovereign. God is "before all things, and in him all things hold together".³ It is difficult to see the purposes of such a God thwarted simply by humankind's neglect of the natural universe. Might not God intervene to prevent such human error from bringing ultimate disaster? Has he not already done so in Christ?

³ Colossians 1:17