

## Ethics and Economics

### Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case-Method Approach

**James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers**

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003 (325 pages)

The modern environmental movement has been characterized by numerous conflicts over an appropriate ethic for humans' interaction with the physical world. Much of the ethical debate is grounded in some sort of spiritual values, but, unfortunately, a great deal of environmental spirituality is far removed from a Christian worldview. Rather, it usually embodies a form of pantheism, or the belief that God and nature are one and the same. This volume is an attempt to present a Christian environmental ethic and to apply it to a wide range of situations. The two authors recognize that ethical reflection on environmental matters is not a simple issue and that many times the conflicting claims over the use of resources represent conflicting ethical perspectives. Nevertheless, they provide numerous insights into how ethics can clarify and help to resolve difficult issues.

*Christian Environmental Ethics* is a useful and thought-provoking book in that it uses a series of nine case studies that capture the ethical conflicts inherent in many environmental problems. The authors argue that there are four perspectives with regard to nature: (1) developmentalist, (2) conservationist, (3) preservationist, and (4) critical eco-justice. They discuss in some detail each of these perspectives and how these worldviews result in particular ethical perceptions of environmental issues. They also develop four Christian norms they believe should inform ethical judgments: sustainability, sufficiency, participation, and solidarity. These norms are used to evaluate each of the case studies, and the different perspectives of the participants are carefully laid out.

The authors are suspicious of modern economic growth and economic development and believe that lowering consumption levels, especially in the rich Western world, is an essential part of environmentalism. Nevertheless, they do a reasonably good job of presenting all sides of the conflicts inherent in each case study in an even-handed manner, and it is clear that they want to be fair and honest in their discussion of the application of a Christian worldview to environmental issues. The case studies are very useful in illuminating the conflicts that exist, and easy solutions and pat answers are avoided.

Despite the inherent attractiveness of the case-study approach and its usefulness in highlighting ethical conflicts, the book is flawed on several accounts. In the first place, the authors do not understand how markets and property rights function, and this lack of understanding makes their analysis incorrect at several points. They believe that in a market system a desire for short-term return drives economic organizations, and this short-term perspective causes significant harm to the environment. However, under a regime of well-defined and enforced property rights, decision-makers have more reason to take account of future needs and future potential resource uses than under alternative institutional environments such as government control.

They also fail to recognize that all the issues they regard as environmental problems are really property-rights problems and that better definition and enforcement, through private agreements, the actions of government through legislation, or the application of the common law, is the appropriate remedy. Instead, they find the answer in greater government regulation, which they assume will result in greater participation and solidarity. Needless to say, the modern public choice revolution in economics is not a part of their understanding of the interface between government and markets. Public choice explains why the marginalized and powerless, the very groups that the authors are most concerned about, have little voice in the political process.

Finally, their four categories of attitudes toward nature (developmentalist, conservationist, preservationist, and critical eco-justice), lead them to label economic growth as the enemy of the environment. Therefore, if one is a developmentalist, that means that economic growth reigns supreme, whereas if people hold one of the other three views, there is more likely to be an increase in environmental quality. This typology ignores entirely the large literature on the relationship between economic growth and the environment. This relationship is usually labeled the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC), and a great deal of theoretical and empirical work has been done in developing our understanding of EKCs. Environmental Kuznets Curves map the relationship between a community's income and some specific measure of environmental quality, such as the concentration of sulfur dioxide. The general form of the Environmental Kuznets Curve shows that, using several measures of air pollution and resource extraction as proxies of environmental quality, environmental conditions in a particular country worsen for a period of time but then substantially improve. This means that those called developmentalists by Martin-Schramm and Stivers are not necessarily in opposition to the improvements in environmental quality, especially in the developed world. It also

means that those in the other categories are not the only ones who favor improvement in the environment.

It is also true that the overall institutional framework matters, something that Martin-Schramm and Stivers pay little attention to. When property rights are well-defined and enforced and a country has a functioning rule of law, the turning point for environmental quality occurs at a lower per capita income—that is, environmental quality starts to improve more quickly—than in countries with less-developed property rights and markets. This is important to the overall arguments of the book because the practical thrust of the authors' interpretation of their ethical norms of participation and solidarity would result in the attenuation of property rights and less attention to the rule of law.

Despite the flaws listed above, the book still is an interesting approach to Christian environmental ethics. As long as one reads it with the understanding that there are significant omissions, it can be helpful to thoughtful Christians who want to apply their religious perspective to environmental issues. It would be particularly useful if it were used in conjunction with some of the other environmental literature that presents a more complete understanding of the relationship among institutions, prosperity, and environmental quality. A good addition would be *You Have to Admit It's Getting Better: From Economic Prosperity to Environmental Quality*, edited by Terry L. Anderson (Hoover Institution Press, 2004). Although the Anderson volume does not attempt to develop a set of full-blown ethical concepts to apply to environmental issues, the compilation of evidence with regard to wealth and environmental quality is impressive. If one combined the ethical approach in *Christian Environmental Ethics* with a more thorough understanding of what is actually going on in the world, one could usefully apply Christian ethics to environmental problems.

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## Trade, Development, and Social Justice

**Raj Bhala**

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In olden times, the doctors of the church used to write treatises quite like this. Today, one must emphasize that Raj Bhala, Rice Distinguished Professor at the University of Kansas School of Law, is offering a much nuanced, groundbreaking, truly interdisciplinary effort. All claims that the author makes are precisely specified and are meant to transform the shouting match at present dominating the field of international trade relations—read “globalism”—into a reasoned discussion.

At one level, the book is directed at administrators of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and seasoned protesters who have taken upon themselves the well-intentioned task of reducing the plight of developing countries. The book opens and