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Peer reviewed

Review: Environmental Values in Christian Art
By Susan Power Bratton

Reviewed by Byron Anderson
Northern Illinois University, USA

Bratton, Susan Power. *Environmental Values in Christian Art*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008. ix, 282 pp. ISBN 9780791472651. US\$30, cloth.

Environmental Art in Christian Values claims that Christian art is an underutilized primary source for research and sets out to “correct this deficiency and to explore the evolution of environmental values through Christian history by investigating trends in religious material culture” (p. 2). The book examines many examples of Christian art and architecture from the late 2nd century in Rome to the 17th century in the Netherlands. Bratton, Professor of Environmental Studies at Baylor University, provides descriptions of art found in catacombs, on sarcophagi, stained glass, bas-reliefs, mosaics, and other works of art. Of the many pieces of art described, fifteen are accompanied by a black-and-white photo.

Christian art is best understood “as an evolving dialog among Christians and between Christianity and the greater culture” (p. 229). Early Christian art was environmentally peaceful and generous toward nature, and did encourage a more respectful attitude toward animals, which were generally portrayed as humble servants. Jesus is strongly associated with nature and animals, and in early paintings, takes on the personae of the Good Shepard. Medieval Christian art reflected the belief that beauty in nature reflected the beauty, perfection and regeneration power of Christ. During this time, “...the Franciscans became the first ‘environmental movement’” (p. 157). Paintings of St. Francis reflect nature as a co-participant in the sacred story. Renaissance painters, such as Giovanni Bellini, Pierodella Francesca, and Leonardo da Vinci, used nature as a metaphor of Christ’s life and God’s intentions. Paintings no longer needed a saint or steeple to verify divine presence. By the 16th century, Calvinism saw the natural world as a miracle worthy of praise.

The text does not research Christian environmental action per se. Having “Environmental Values” at the start of the title could prove misleading to interested readers. The cataloging-in-publication data places this book in the Library of Congress classification of Philosophy, Psychology, Religion, subclass Doctrinal Theology. The book does research how the relationship to nature changed from Roman and Celtic paganism to Christianity, how Christ related to nature, how animals and plants are depicted in Christian art and the spiritual roles nonhuman creatures play, and how the art represents ownership, economics, and management of natural resources.

The information provided could be of interest to students and scholars of the environment. The book refutes the misguided notion that the environment and Christianity are at odds. Through an examination of Christian art there is an environmental aspect to be found in the evolving history of Christianity. Each of the book’s chapters is supplemented with a “Suggested Reading” bibliography and most chapters have a “Locating Art” section of related resources, databases, and keywords to try when searching the Internet. Notes and an index complete the book. Recommended for academic and research collections.

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