

# Reviews



**MONASTIC ECOLOGICAL WISDOM: A LIVING TRADITION**, by Samuel Torvend, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023. 176 pages. \$21.95.

Samuel Torvend promises an examination of the ecology of the *Rule of St Benedict* as expressed by the earliest Benedictine communities and in the life of Benedict himself. This timely book is fit to address both the modern day rise in concern over climate change as well as the increased interest in eco-theology. Torvend's work is short, digestible, and complex in its historical analysis.

While purporting to be a study of the *Rule of St Benedict*, Torvend's book spends a significant amount of space exploring broader early Christian history. He pays particular attention to the ecology of the Roman Empire and the counter claims made by the earliest Christians. With attention paid to the use of the environment in daily life, spiritual imagination, and liturgy, Torvend attempts to disprove the often repeated claim that Christianity possesses a disdain for the environment that is directly responsible for our current ecological crisis.

The latter of half the book deals more directly with Benedict and his earliest monasteries. Here Torvend draws on the paleoecology and archeology of the Italian peninsula to illustrate the natural world in which Benedict lived. In Torvend's narrative he demonstrates that the flight from the world of Benedict and the early monks was rather a flight from the human world and into the natural world, which embraces God more fully. The social and political factors of the mid sixth century in which Benedict lived were times of extreme conflict and uncertainty, and this flight into the natural world, in which Benedict sees God's presence, ground Benedict's demand that his monks provide safety and stability to those in need. Torvend continues to connect this ecological vision to the commands of both Scripture and the *Rule* to care for the poor, with

attention paid to *Laudato Si'* and other developments in Christian theology across traditions.

*Monastic Ecological Wisdom* is a brief prelude into a broader study of Christian understandings of the natural world. While he compellingly argues for a specific reading of the place of nature in Benedict, the book is limited by its size and cannot address competing visions which may do more to justify the attack on Christian environmental ethics. He briefly compares the vision of Benedict and many other monastic saints who speak to animals and treat them as equals in God's creation to the vision of the Neo-Platonists, specifically the Pseudo-Dionysius, which sees creation as an ordered and hierarchical chain of being with humanity above the natural world. Torvend places much of the blame for negative views of the environment at their feet, but does not give this tradition much space to defend itself. However this work is not meant to lay out a comprehensive history of Christian environmental ethics, and cannot give such space without a drastic shift in the scope of his work.

This book serves as an excellent window into one aspect of monastic theology. Traditions which do not widely practice monasticism still have much to learn from Benedict, and the view represented in this book is insightful and timely. Torvend's historical exploration also covers the shared history of all modern Christian churches, and is useful for any interested in starting an exploration of historical environmental ethics.

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