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12-2014

## Review of *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration* by Gretel Van Wieren

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### Recommended Citation

Schaefer, Jame, "Review of *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration* by Gretel Van Wieren" (2014). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 410.  
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*Horizons*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (December 2014): 392-393. [DOI](#). This article is © Cambridge University Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Cambridge University Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without express permission from Cambridge University Press.

## ***Review of *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration*. By Gretel Van Wieren***

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Aiming for “a positive, solution-oriented, and inspiring” story to explain how people who profess the Christian faith can live “more cooperatively and graciously with land” (viii), Gretel Van Wieren achieves her goal in *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration* by sharing her research and reflection on a plethora of ecological restoration projects in the United States. Van Wieren, an assistant professor of religious studies at Michigan State University and pastor in the Reformed Church in America, argues convincingly that hands-on experiences in restoring an area as closely as possible to its predamaged status can intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually transform the faithful, and can generate in the person environmental virtues of “attentiveness, respect, admiration, care, and love” (viii).

Van Wieren groups her six chapters into two sections, "Restoring Earth" and "Restored to Earth," to underscore her thesis that the relationship people have with the land can be healed when they are engaged in restoration activities. In the first section, she explores the scholarly field of environmental ethics with emphasis on the thought and practice of ecological restoration; argues for restoration as a "positive and constructive movement" to counter philosophers who consider it a form of human domination and/or a false claim that degraded lands can be fully restored; explains the spirituality of participating in ecological restoration, which concurrently heals the wounded area, the person, and the community engaged in the project; and examines the values generated within restoration communities that orient them toward morally responsible actions in relation to the land.

In the second section, Van Wieren more deeply probes the community-building benefits of restoration projects as people both work together and tell stories about their efforts. These benefits can be seen, for example, in a restoration project led by the Benedictine sisters at the Holy Wisdom Monastery in Madison, Wisconsin. For Van Wieren, their efforts demonstrate a sacramental spirituality in which they understand themselves as experiencing the presence of God in and through the land, and which motivates them to engage in the process of restoring it. Van Wieren describes their activities as a ritual in which the nuns and the other people who voluntarily join them are healed in their relation to the land as they work to heal the land. These and other restoration efforts lead the author to extend the understanding of "redemption" as being forgiven by the land as well as by God, and of "justice" as due to the land as well as to humans.

There is much to commend in this well-organized, well-substantiated, and well-written monograph. Clearly, Van Wieren breaks new ground in the scholarly field of environmental ethics by focusing on the spiritual, religious, and moral dimensions of restoration activities, which have received little attention from ethicists. She plumbs, weighs, selects, and skillfully integrates sources from ecology, philosophy, ethics, and primarily mainstream Protestant theology to provide a cogent and compelling understanding of the importance and benefits of land restoration. And she provides openings for further research and exploration into the values and ethical principles she identifies and to which she refers in endnotes and a bibliography.

One area of her project remains puzzling: the motivation for Christians to initiate and participate in the restoration projects she highlights. Whereas she is clear about the profound sacramental perspective that spurred and continues to spur the Benedictine sisters at Holy Wisdom Monastery, specificity about the tenets of the Christian faith that motivated other projects is warranted.

Another need pertains to the meaning and use of the term "sacred" when referring to the land (e.g., 184). Though Van Wieren grasps the traditional understanding of "sacramental" when attributing it to Earth and earth/the land as mediating God's presence, Christianity and the other two Abrahamic religions traditionally reserve "sacred" for God, who is distinct from the world and alone worthy of worship.

These criticisms should not distract from the overall value of Van Wieren's excellent contribution to the scholarly literature and the path she has opened more widely for additional research and reflection on ecological restoration from a religious faith perspective. Libraries in colleges, universities, seminaries, and parishes will find in *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and*

*Ecological Restoration* an excellent addition to their holdings. It is especially appropriate for use with undergraduate students in spirituality, ethics, and Christian discipleship courses.