

Is Religion Bad for the Environment?

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In 1966 an American historian, Lynn White, lectured to the American Association for the Advancement in Science on “the Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis.” His lecture was published the following year in the journal *Science*, **155**:1204. It has been immensely influential and reprinted many times. White’s diagnosis was blunt. Basing himself on the text in Genesis 1:26,28 that God gave humankind “dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth”, he argued that this had led to an attitude that “We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim. We shall have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason but to serve man.”

This indictment is often repeated. Town planner Ian McHarg has written “If one seeks licence to those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbours with atomic bombs, employ poisons without constraint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality, there could be no better injunction than this text [Genesis 1:28] ... Dominion and subjugation must be expunged as the biblical injunction of man’s relation to nature.” Pioneer conservationist Max Nicholson has written similarly, “The first step must be to reject and scrub out the complacent image ... of Man licensed by God to conduct himself as the earth’s worst pest.”

White’s thesis has been criticised by both historians and theologians. Perhaps the strongest counter-argument comes from the massive success over several centuries of the Benedictine monasteries in caring and cultivating their estates in direct obedience to their spiritual Rule. Notwithstanding, there is undoubted truth in White’s judgement. A Government White Paper in 1990 which laid out official policy for the environment and which was the formal statement of the UK’s position to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 agreed with White:

“Ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, we have had an almost boundless faith in our own intelligence and in the benign consequences of our actions. Whatever the discoveries of science, whatever the rates at which we destroyed other species, whatever the changes we made to our seas and landscapes, we have believed that the world would remain much the same as in all its fundamentals. We now **know** (my emphasis) that this is no longer true ... Increasingly we understand that the ways we produce energy, use natural resources and produce waste threaten to change fundamentally the balance of our natural environment. We may not be seeing the end of Nature, but Nature is certainly under threat ...

The starting point [for action] ... is the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental policies. Mankind has always been capable of great good and great evil. That is certainly true of our role as custodians of the planet.”

Theological Understanding

However, White’s belief that the Genesis verses imply the world is solely for our use is wrong, although it reflects a widespread misinterpretation of the text. White errs in his assumption that God’s first command to humankind “to have dominion” over all living things (Genesis 1:26,28) is an unrestricted licence to use the earth for our own purposes. Although the word translated ‘dominion’ does relate to kingly conquest and rule, it does not here mean despotic sovereignty; rather it should be taken to imply responsible loving care, which was the Hebraic ideal of kingship, typified by David, Solomon and Our Lord Himself (Psalm 72). Furthermore, the context is of humankind made “in God’s image.” In other words, there is a sense in which we reflect some of God’s characteristics. One of these must surely be reliability or responsibility; the biblical God is not fickle or capricious. The Genesis account tells us that we are charged with the responsible care of all creation - a task which is given not to any particular religious or racial group, but to men and women everywhere. Like it or not, we are God-appointed stewards; if we fail, we are disobeying God.

White’s arguments have become part of a widespread belief that Christianity has been the major cause of damaging attitudes towards the environment. Whilst it cannot be denied that Bible misunderstanding has contributed to such attitudes, it is also a fact that no religion (or philosophy, such as Marxism or Confucianism) has in practice been effective in preventing or even retarding environmental degradation. Twenty or thirty years ago it was fashionable to claim that ‘Eastern’ religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) were more environmentally friendly than ‘Western’ ones (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). This is not borne out in practice: greed dominates in the East just as much as in the West.

Does this mean that there is no moral basis for creation care? Is our relationship to the environment wholly pragmatic and self-interested?

Christian Belief

The Church of England produced a statement before the Earth Summit in 1992 that began:

“We all share and depend on the same world with its finite and often non-renewable resources. Christians believe that this world belongs to God by creation, redemption and sustaining, and that he has entrusted it to humankind, made in his image; we are in the position of stewards ...”

This assertion follows directly from explicit statements in the Bible.

1. a. We live in God's world (Psalm 24:1) devised, designed and made from nothing by God (Genesis 1:1; Job 38:2-6; Psalm 8:3, 19:1, 104; Hebrews 1:2; Revelation 4:11) and separate from Him [Creation is to be respected and tended (Genesis 2:15) but not worshipped (Isaiah 44:9-20) - that is pantheism].

Pantheism - the belief that God (or gods) dwells in all living things (even in non-living material like water and rocks) is common among "greens". It means that nature is worshipped as divine and environmental damage is desecration. It is a feature of New Age beliefs, which are based (in so far as they can be characterised) by the assumption that barriers between individuals, between life and non-life, between god and living beings are so fluid that they are non-existent. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis - although essentially a scientific hypothesis (as yet unproven) about feed-back interactions between different systems - is frequently used to claim credibility for such ideas.

- b. God is the Redeemer and Sustainer of creation (Isaiah 40:28; John 3:16; Colossians 1:17-20). He is not simply a distant Designer but an indwelling and active Upholder and Guide as well; in theological language, God is both transcendent and immanent.
 - c. The purpose of creation is to praise God (Psalms 65:13, 96:11-13, 98:7-9, 148:7-10; Proverbs 8:22-30; Revelation 5:13).
In his only recorded sermon to out and out unbelievers, Paul does not expound atonement or resurrection or Christ's divinity, but the regularity and reliability of the seasons (Acts 14:17): "[God] has not left you without some clue to his nature in the benefits he bestows: he sends you rain from heaven and the crops in their seasons; he gives you food in plenty and keeps you in good heart."
2. God has entrusted His creation to us (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:15; Deuteronomy 11:12; Psalm 115:16). "The Earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation. This does not mean that God has handed it over to us in such a way as to relinquish his own right over it, but rather that he has given us the responsibility to preserve and develop the Earth on his behalf" (John Stott).
 3. We will be held responsible by God for the Earth's care (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; Matthew 25:14-30). We are told to till (or tend) and look after the earth (Genesis 2:15); this implies active care, not defiant preservation

as if we were curators of a museum. The usual word for this task is stewardship, but there are those who do not like the use of ‘steward’ in this context. They object that stewardship tends to imply an absent owner. In addition, our efforts are so puny in comparison to the world’s vastness that they are seen as inevitably ineffective. Notwithstanding, Christian believers cannot dodge the job God has given them. They may prefer to call themselves trustees, managers, factors or simply creation-carers, but this does not affect the task.

The Church’s Apathy

Why is the Church so apathetic - almost allergic - to the clear teaching of scripture about creation-care? One reason is probably the persistence of the idea that the world is much the same as it was when God created it, albeit marred by the effects of Adam’s sin - to which I return below. This belief in lack of change is compounded and confused by the Platonic notion of unchangeability which infected the early Church and still lingers. It has encouraged ‘creationists’ in their battles with ‘evolutionists’ and undermined thereby the development of a robust and biblically-based doctrine of creation. Perhaps even more potent is the assumption (particularly in western Christendom) that the world is “only” a stage provided for God’s saving work through Christ’s life, death and resurrection. The effect is that we behave as if the world is nothing more than a neutral frame for our lives. God is not so much rejected and disbelieved as ignored. He is treated as unnecessary and irrelevant in his own world. If he is truly Almighty and All-holy, it is no wonder that he condemns us, and cuts us off from fellowship with him. It would be better to say that we have alienated ourselves from him.

But there is another reason for Christian failure to take the environment seriously, and one which is embedded deeply into traditional Christian teaching. This is the belief that the world is “fallen” from an initial state of perfection as a result of God’s curse on both human beings and their world (Genesis 3:14-19). This might seem to make environmental degradation God-ordained and inevitable.

What does the story of the fall mean? Different people treat it in a variety of ways, ranging from literal acceptance to uncritical rejection. However, it is worth remembering that a cardinal rule of Bible interpretation is to check all references to any subject against each other. The fall is not referred to directly in the Old Testament except in Genesis 3; and it is not a major doctrine for either Judaism or Islam, although Genesis is part of the sacred books of both religions. However, Paul clearly accepts its reality when he discusses the “first Adam and the last Adam” in Romans 5-8 (and in 1 Corinthians 15:45), and explicitly refers to the curse on the land in Romans 8:19-22:

“The created universe is waiting with eager expectation for God’s sons to be revealed. It was made subject to frustration, not of its own choice

but by the will of him who subjected it, yet with the hope that the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and is to enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Up to the present, as we know, the whole created universe in all its parts groans as if in the pangs of childbirth.”

This is a difficult passage. A helpful commentary is that of Charles Cranfield:

“What sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation – the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn or the planet Venus – suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence? The answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties, and all the varied chorus of sub-human life, created for God’s glory, is cheated of its fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God’s praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways, but since their praise is destined to be not a collection of individual offerings but part of a magnificent whole, the united praise of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that for which they were created to be, so long as man’s part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.”

The implication is that Paul sees our role in this life as stewards (or whatever), essential to God’s plan. However, Paul does not stop there: he tells us that the “universe is waiting with eager expectation for God’s sons to be revealed” (Romans 8:18). But in preceding verses, he proclaims that the consequences of Adam’s disobedience have been annulled by Christ’s reconciling death (5:6-11) and that we are *already* God’s sons (8:14-16), so long as we are united with Christ (5:1; 8:1) and “live by the Spirit” (8:9). In other words, our role as creation-carers is even now made possible by God’s saving work; the gospel affects our relationship with the environment as well as with God himself. Paul repeats this conclusion in his letter to the Colossians: “God chose ... through him (Jesus Christ) to reconcile *all things* to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross – *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven” (1:19,20). When John wrote about salvation, he recorded “God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his only Son ...” (John 3:16). The French theologian Henri Blocher put it, “If man obeys God, he would be the means of blessing to the earth; but in his insatiable greed ... and in his short-sighted selfishness, he pollutes and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert. That is the main thrust of the curse of Genesis 3.”

The seemingly inescapable inference from all this is that environmental care is embedded in the heart of biblical faith: it is a responsibility imposed on us all from the time of creation and it is inseparable from the witness of those redeemed by Christ. Environmentalism is not one among many priorities or options, but an obligation laid on all – and one which demands a response. Looking after creation is an integral part of religious commitment.

A Needy World

Creation care is not a defining trait of modern-day Christianity. Religious people too often simply chase behind secular concerns about environmental damage – polluting, extinguishing wildlife and habitats, mortgaging the future by gases which are causing increasing climate change, using up non-replaceable fossil fuel, etc. The “world” is more worried about all this than religion. Alarm bells are sounding ever louder: the hazards of persistent pesticides described by Rachel Carson (in her book *Silent Spring*), the dangers from chemical manufacturing highlighted by the explosions at Bhopal; radiation following Chernobyl; pollution following damage to oil tankers – *Torrey Canyon*, *Amoco Cadiz*, *Exxon Valdez*, *Braer*, *Sea Empress*, *Prestige*; holes in the ozone layer with a subsequent epidemic in skin cancer; growing climatic instability leading to droughts, floods and a surge in insurance claims; declines in birds like lapwings, larks, sparrows and even starlings; the list goes on and on. The “world” has responded with constraints and conferences. Parliaments have legislated about pollution, planning, recycling and wildlife protection. The first United Nations Conference (on the Human Environment) was held in Stockholm in 1972. It has been followed by Conferences on Urbanisation, Population, and most notably on Environment and Development (the “Earth Summit”) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, followed by a second Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 (the “World Conference on Sustainable Development”).

Increasingly, the emphasis has focused on the crucial need to avoid permanent and irreversible damage to the planet. In 1980, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature produced a “World Conservation Strategy” showing that development (including the alleviation of poverty) and environmental conservation were inseparable. If industrialisation, social advancement, etc., neglects the environment it will be unsustainable; the communities concerned will be poisoned and then starved by their own effluvia and the destruction of nature’s “services” (i.e. photosynthesis, flood control, detoxification, etc.). Conversely, conservation without development is nothing more than selfish protectionism.

The strategy had three explicit aims:

- To maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems;
- To preserve genetic diversity;
- To ensure the *sustainable* utilisation of species and ecosystems.

The idea of ‘sustainability’ was taken up and came into everyday usage through the work of the Brundtland Commission, whose Report *Our Common Future* was published in 1987. The Report defined sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Mrs Thatcher paraphrased it by reminding us that “we do not hold a freehold on our world, but only a full repairing lease. We have a moral duty to look after our world and hand it on in good order to future generations.” The Government White Paper already cited commented on this, “That is what the experts mean when they talk of ‘sustainable development’: not sacrificing tomorrow’s prospects for a largely illusory gain today.” Crispin Tickell put it, “Treating the earth as if we mean to stay”; former Secretary of State John Gummer’s version is “Not cheating on our children.”

What does ‘sustainable development’ mean in practice? It certainly can NOT mean ‘sustainable *growth*’. The only way for growth to occur is by adding new resources (or substituting new assets for existing ones – such as when renewable energy from wind, wave, tide or ‘biomass’ replaces fossil fuels). A vivid picture of sustainability is given by the idea of an ‘ecological footprint’ which is the area required to support indefinitely (that is, sustainably) a human population with a particular standard of living; it is the balance between resources we consume (food, fuel, land and its use, building materials) and the impacts we have (waste, greenhouse gases, water, etc.). Globally, the mean footprint per person is 2.2 ha; the mean capacity from biological production is 1.9 ha/person. In the UK, we have a greater deficit: our footprint is 4.6 ha/person, the biocapacity of the UK averages at 1.5 ha/person. We are taking three times our ‘fair share’.

‘Ecological deficits’ mean that we are either preying on other people or using up ecological ‘capital’, i.e. stealing from our children. Such behaviour is clearly unsustainable, never mind being unethical. The current rate of ecological use may allow us to maintain our lifestyle for our own span, but it will inevitably catch up on our descendants. Ecological footprint studies do not solve anything, but they give us an urgent wakeup call. They focus on how ecological science becomes moral challenge.

An Expectant World

What can – or should - we as individuals do? A common reaction is that the problems are so enormous that no actions on our part will have any effect. We have to depend on others.

Can we rely on rational behaviour by our legislatures? If we judge by the impact of professional thinkers – the philosophers, the answer is probably ‘no’. Environmental

philosophy is growing in stature but much of its effort has been directed to (or against) other philosophers, “asking how systematic thinking about environmental matters might mesh with a whole philosophical theory [means] referring to a philosophical theory which includes not just ethics, but also metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, history of philosophy, and so on.”

Individual philosophers have certainly influenced those outside the philosophical community (e.g. Arne Naess with his proposals for a ‘deep ecology’; Alfred North Whitehead, whose ideas of ‘process’ underlie the interpretations of many environmental theologians; Bryan Norton, whose advocacy of the transforming effect of nature on human attitudes has provided a helpful bridge between anthropocentrism and biocentrism; Mark Sagoff by introducing a healthy scepticism about the use and value of law in environmental ethics), but the net impact of environmental philosophy is negative in the judgment of Andrew Light and Eric Katz (in a recent book *Environmental Pragmatism*, 1996): they complain that environmental ethics has “failed to develop its practical task” because it is captive to “a methodological and theoretical dogmatism.”

Even if politicians are not led by reason, are they doing a good job with the environment? Probably not. The wrangling about controlling ‘greenhouse gases’ and the failure to implement the Convention on Climate Change agreed at the Earth Summit in 1992 is distressing, but also dangerous. Over fishing in virtually every part of the world is another sad example. Smoke-control legislation in Britain is a woeful cautionary tale of political equivocation. The effects of smoke on health and early death were firmly established by John Graunt in 1662, using the records of mortality kept by parish clerks, but it took Parliament nearly three centuries to pass a comprehensive Clean Air Act (in 1956). There were numerous bills introduced into Parliament over this period but only the death of prize bulls at Smithfield and the cancellation of *La Traviata* at Covent Garden during the last great London smog in 1952 that finally stirred our legislators. Politicians respond to pressure, but their responses tend to be governed by media and lobbying rather than rationality.

It is with this in mind that many environmentalists see religion as important. Religion, after all, is about forming (and changing) attitudes. The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) held its twenty fifth anniversary meeting in Assisi and called on the world’s religions to state their commitment to the environment. The result was a set of Assisi Declarations, “messages on Man and Nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Baha’i.” This was followed by various inter-faith initiatives on environmental care, but their impact has been slight. Although different religionists may cooperate in practical works, there is little consensus on motives or doctrine. Indeed, this is probably impossible. For example, Buddhism with its beliefs in

reincarnation has no concept of an initial creation. The most successful project has been that of the German theologian Hans Küng, who has developed a ‘global ethic’ “not as a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others, [but as] a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes.”

Küng’s campaign may not be impossibly utopian. It is possible to extract from the key international declarations on the environment (notably the Stockholm Declaration, 1972; the World Charter for Nature, 1982; the Rio Declaration, 1992; and the [draft] International Covenant on Environment and Development, 1995) a set of principles describing attitudes and actions (to governments, neighbours, nature; polluter pays and precautionary principles; environmental impact assessments; transgenerational equity; honest [i.e. comprehensive] accounting) which may be regarded as a modern version of the creation ordinances in Genesis which describe humankind and the nature of creation itself. These principles have become part of an “Earth Charter” drawn up by a group led by Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the 1982 and 1992 UN Environmental Conferences, and former President Mikhail Gorbachev.

This brings us full circle. There is a clear convergence between the biblical doctrine of the environment set out in the first part of this essay and the principles that have emerged from international dialogue. Followers of the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) ought to be able to make common cause with environmentalists everywhere in creation care, and to provide a reason for that care which goes beyond mere pragmatic survival. Christians can go further than Jews or Muslims, because their doctrine of a fallen world is inseparable from a gospel of hope for that world through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Martin Holdgate, former Chief Scientist at the Department of the Environment has written:

“Progress will not come through preaching or Summit Declarations, however enlightened ... Debate must go on ... But it does appear that some guiding values are apparent and that they seek to link what strikes at the mind and heart as ethically sound principles, with the mind’s fear of what may happen otherwise and with our calculations of personal and group advantage. These universal themes are a recognition:

- That long-term sustainability must be an object of policy now;
- That equity between peoples and nations in their use of, and impact on, the finite resources and vulnerable systems of the planet must be improved; and

- That personal obligations to other people and to the world of nature need to be codified and communicated.”

Four centuries ago, Francis Bacon described God’s two books: “Let no one think or maintain that he can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God’s word or in the book of God’s works; but rather let all endeavour an endless progress or proficiencie in both.”

God has written two books: a book of words, which we call the Bible; and a book of works, which is creation. He is the author of both. They are written in very different languages, but we have no excuse if we fail to read them both because of difficulty or (worse) laziness in interpretation. Those who read only one of God’s books will necessarily discover only a part of God’s natures and purposes.

Further Reading

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