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British and American Attitudes to Nature



The word ‘nature’ in Britain, or America, is not just an abstract or even biblical concept. It is a word we picture with images of very particular landscapes, some of which are ‘wilderness’, relatively untouched by human intervention, and some of which have been formed over centuries through a history of farming, landowning, mining, industry, and even conservation. The landscape has been changed, or unchanged, in a context of developing beliefs about what may or may not be done. Many of these beliefs may influence our reading of Scripture today, when we try to conceive of or visualise ‘the creation’. The British and American experiences are different, because the long-settled British landscape, created from forest clearances, contrasts with (but also gave rise to) the American idea of ‘frontier’, before which is ‘civilization’, and beyond which is ‘wild nature’, needing to be tamed.

This paper looks at the two traditions, seen against the biblical basis which to some extent can be found to underlie them. For in Genesis itself we can find two themes which are like poles in the history of human dealings with nature. There is the garden, a place of order and care, with the world outside, a place needing to be subdued, as in agriculture (Genesis 1 and 2): tilling and care go together. But in Genesis 3 another dynamic enters the scene. As a consequence of sinful rebellion, the earth is cursed, and becomes hostile. Now tilling the land involves toil and sweat, contending with thorns and thistles. Co-operatively working with the cycles of nature has been transformed into a battle with nature. That partly-broken relationship with nature underlies the story of humanity on the earth.

A recent author, Keith Thomas, has identified two parallel themes in the human treatment of nature, those of ‘Conquest’ and of ‘Conservation’¹. He sees a mainstream, that of conquest, which sees nature as a force to be overcome and controlled. But he also identifies an undercurrent, also present in history, that of restraint and

¹ ‘Conquest or Conservation’ is also a section heading in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (Penguin 1994), on which I draw extensively.

care, which corresponds to the original command to Adam to ‘keep’ the garden (Gen. 2:15). This contrary flow resists the onward drive of conquest and expansion. It becomes increasingly important as the negative results of unrestrained human greed and selfishness become more evident. In this paper, we shall see how these two streams have worked out in history.

Conquest in Britain

The complexity of the word ‘nature’ can be illustrated from the history of the South Downs, near where I live, soon to be created a National Park. The famous turf, rich in biodiversity, which is to be ‘conserved’, is a consequence of mediaeval ploughing and centuries of sheep farming. Left to itself, it reverts to scrub, and ultimately to forest. Conservation includes regular scrub-clearing, so it is not ‘natural’.

Temperate, broad-leaved forests once covered the English countryside, sheltering a variety of plant and animal life, and every human age has interfered with it. Stone axes in the Neolithic age assisted clearing, which was continued in the Roman, Saxon and Danish periods. By the time of Domesday Book only 20% of the country was wooded. Not all the timber use (for houses, ships, and as charcoal for iron-smelting and glass making) was pure depletion, however. Coppicing was known in early times and timber from the Sussex Weald was certainly replaced. However there was little ‘original nature’ about medieval Britain.

In the Tudor and Stuart periods we find evidence of a conscious subjugation of nature. According to the Keith Thomas, the majority of writers considered land and all creatures as made entirely for human benefit, and hence to be subdued, tamed and made fruitful. Animals could be treated with complete freedom; hence horses were often ridden to death, and animals had no rights but were treated cruelly, even to satisfy idle pleasure, as in bear and bull baiting, and cock-fighting². To some extent the Bible was read through the eyes of Aristotle (384-322 BC), who had

² Keith Thomas, *op.cit.* pp 143-149

propounded the idea that animals existed only to serve human beings, as did the Stoics after him; so Scriptures on caring for animals were ignored. In the Renaissance, Keith Thomas tells us, there was an anxiety to maintain the boundaries between humanity and the animals: the longhouse which had been shared by people and animals had given way to separated accommodation, and animals were seen as totally different from us³. On an intellectual level this tendency reached its climax with the view of Descartes, that animals were machines, incapable of feeling. Civilization was seen as the curbing of the 'animal' parts of human nature by means of religion, and the image of civilization was the ordered garden, with straight lines and all irregularity suppressed.

The influential philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) saw the purpose of science as for the human race to 'recover that right over Nature which belongs to it by divine bequest'. But, writing from within the Christian tradition, he believed in limits to exploitation. He said that 'nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed'. But some of his successors accepted no such limits. Alister McGrath writes: 'The Enlightenment...began with the entirely praiseworthy intention of civilizing the crudities of nature; it ended up destroying England's pastoral economy, turning the countryside into a vast disease- and poverty-ridden urban sprawl'⁴. The dominant model of the universe as a machine, deriving from the ideas of Isaac Newton, lent itself to the successful industrial economy of the nineteenth century, but when applied to agriculture, nature came to suffer. Karl Marx presciently wrote: 'All progress in capitalist agriculture is progress in the art not only of robbing the labourer but robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the lasting source of that fertility'. Industrial development has given rise to incalculable benefits. But we are now seeing the shadow side of these developments. Alister McGrath concludes 'The roots of our ecological crisis lie in the rise of a self-centred view of reality that has come into the possession of the hardware it needs to achieve its goals'.⁵

Conservation in Britain

The object of Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World* is to show that along with a mainstream of harsh exploitation, English attitudes show a persistent undercurrent of care and conservation. His study is of England 1500-1800, but as is well known, a Christian regard for nature is traceable back to the Celtic Church. A saying attributed to Ninian of Whithorn states that 'the supreme aim of the study of nature is to perceive the eternal Word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal, and every man and woman', and according to Columban 'if you want to know the Creator, understand the created things'. This respect for nature took practical form, from stories of care for animals, to some church leaders forbidding the use of horses for transport!⁶.

³ Ibid. pp 31-41

⁴ Alister McGrath *The Re-enchantment of Nature* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) p 131

⁵ Ibid. p 54

⁶ For examples of Celtic care for nature, see Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) p 169; Susan Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife* (University of

The early Benedictines also promoted a harmonious relationship with nature, safeguarding the health fertility of the soil. In the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the order was virtually re-founded and grew rich and powerful, and much less benign to the environment.

However the close association of animals with people in the medieval period promoted a degree of care, and there were those who campaigned against cruelty to animals. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury warned of the brutalizing effects of hunting, and a fourteenth century treatise judged that 'men should have ruth of beasts and birds and not harm them without cause' and that those that 'torment beasts or fowl... sin...full grievously'. John Ray (1627-1705) questioned whether the creatures had no other end 'but in some way or other to be serviceable to man' and his less orthodox contemporary Thomas Tryon (1634-1703) stated that human rule over creation was 'not absolute or tyrannic, but qualified', and promoted vegetarianism and animal rights. Later Jeremy Bentham was to say of animals in 1789 'ask neither "can they reason?" nor "can they talk", but "can they suffer?"'. Hence the nineteenth century founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (1824) by Wilberforce, Martin and Broome, and the Society for the Protection of Birds (1889, in protest against the shooting of birds for hat plumes) had a long, largely Christian, history behind it.

Tree preservation also has a long history, with prohibition against unauthorised felling going back to the seventh century. In 1664 John Evelyn published his work *Sylva* to encourage planting of trees, and in the C18 the poet Wordsworth represented a new appreciation of wild nature that encouraged preservation and the notion of a 'natural' landscape.

Conquest in America

The first European settlers carried their values to America, but now found themselves in a new situation, that of a wild country, inhabited by wild animals and wild men. To be immersed in the wilderness was to be at risk of moral disintegration and savagery. In fact some Europeans did apparently live an almost animal existence. So the 'frontier' was seen in distinction to wild nature, as the boundary to be pushed back. However although the wilderness was associated with ungodliness, it was also attractive as a sanctuary. As Roderick Nash notes in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 'Their sanctuary and their enemy were one and the same'.⁷ In the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, the mission of the early settlers was to 'march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature'. Or as Nash describes it, 'Wherever they encountered wild country they viewed it through utilitarian spectacles: trees became lumber, prairies farms, and canyons the sites of hydroelectric dams'⁸. Such attitudes survive. 'Subduing the earth' and 'conquering the wilderness' were images used in favour of damming the Colorado river fifty years ago. The influential puritan

Scranton Press 1993) pp182-216, and McGrath, op.cit. p 34

⁷ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1967), 2001, p 35

⁸ Ibid. p 31

leader, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) had believed that the American landscape and its inhabitants had been a stronghold of the devil, hence cultivation and Christian civilization went hand in hand. He believed in scientific cultivation, and was one of the first to experiment in hybridizing maize. In Christian churches today, the 'wise use' of nature is still seen in terms of this 'civilizing' history.

Conservation in America

Despite the strong conquest tradition, conservation has had its advocates almost from the first. Three philosophers or prophets of conservation are particularly remembered today.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) made the famous assertion that the future of the world depended on wildness. He lived in a cabin beside Walden Pond and, according to one writer, came close to a 'Paleolithic awareness of living life within nature'. However he did not advocate living permanently away from civilization. He aimed at a balance and alternation between civilization and wildness, with the rural environment as the point of intersection.

John Muir (1838-1914), who was instrumental in the development of the national parks movement in America, also saw wildness as a necessity for human well-being. Brought up in a Calvinist Presbyterian household, he gradually abandoned belief in a transcendent God, instead seeing God as a wholly immanent presence in nature. During a 'Thousand-mile walk' in the wilderness he had a mystical experience of integration with the whole of nature.

In the long and bitter struggle against the damming of Hetch Hetchy valley within the Yosemite National Park, Muir wrote 'Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man'. Although this dam was eventually approved, a later, similar plan to dam the Grand Canyon was abandoned.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), originally a forestry graduate, campaigned successfully for areas of wilderness in America – 'a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two-weeks' pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trains, cottages or other works of man'. He pronounced that 'while the reduction of the wilderness has been a good thing, its extermination would be a bad one.' Leopold also saw human beings as part of a biotic community, and believed that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'

For all the success of these pioneers, conservation in America is still contested, and the wilderness valued largely for its increasing scarcity.⁹ Sallie McFague considers 'One of the greatest impediments to a workable care ethic for nature has been the American dualistic sensibility that sets culture and nature over against each other'. The conflicting currents of opinion in America

have had an influence beyond the boundaries of the United States, bringing into sharp relief the attitudes towards the natural world that first came from Britain. Recently these attitudes have been globalized and become more eclectic.

Attitudes today

Four current ways of thinking about the natural world have helpfully been identified by Max Oelschlaeger, in his book *The Idea of Wilderness*¹⁰: 'resourcism', 'preservationism', 'biocentrism', and 'ecocentrism'.

1. *Resourcism*: the idea that nature exists principally as a resource for people. For Calvin Beisner in '*Where Garden Meets Wilderness*', 'the amazing leaps in economic productivity and human material prosperity...are a foretaste of the restoration of the cursed creation foretold by Paul' [in Romans 8: 19-23], and he believes that Adam's task (far from leaving wilderness) was to 'transform all of the earth...into a Garden'.¹¹ His positive view of material progress also entails denying that there is significant evidence of global warming, ozone depletion, over-population or resource shortage.

2. *Preservationism*: here the emphasis is on species and ecosystems that are under threat, exemplified by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the County Wildlife Trusts. The underlying philosophy is probably more 'preservation for us, and our children', rather than for nature as having intrinsic value. Michael Northcott criticises recent attempts to put a price on species and ecosystems to preserve them, which he calls 'commodifying' them, making money the norm of value. This fails to address, he says, the deeply-rooted conflict between the modern state based on the alliance of governments and corporations, and the natural economy of the earth.¹²

3. *Biocentrism*: this puts life itself at the centre of concern, and according to Oelschlaeger began with Charles Darwin.

4. *Ecocentrism* places the ecosystem as the central value, and is the opposite extreme to resourcism, because it believes that, according to Oelschlaeger, 'human values which destroy intrinsic value must...be either modified or abandoned'. This view begins with Aldo Leopold, after the Second World War.

Varieties of ecocentrism

Ecocentrism has developed into different streams, which include Deep Ecology, Eco feminism, New Age and Paganism.

Deep Ecology: the term was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), who acknowledged the influence on him of the pantheist Baruch Spinoza

¹⁰ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness – from Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (Yale University Press, 1991)

¹¹ Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness* (Eerdmans 1997) p 13

¹² Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007) pp 134-145

⁹ Roderick Nash, op.cit. p 249

(1632-1677) and of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). He believed all individuals of all species have an equal right to live; however he modified this with two principles. 'Our nearest' have priority (e.g. other humans have priority over smallpox viruses), and there is a distinction between vital and non-vital needs. Politically, Naess would apply deep ecology in terms of sustainability, from local to global. A contemporary deep ecologist is Gary Snyder, a Zen Buddhist monk, who believes we should see the places we live as ecosystems rather than as political or national structures. He believes the frontier's movement should be reversed, so that the wilderness grows back into civilization.

Ecofeminism: ecofeminist theologians argue that women, by their physical nature, are closely connected with nature, and that the domination of nature and of women by men are linked. Anne Primavesi considers that the witchhunts were sanctioned by the association of women with the unruly aspects of nature: 'the indissoluble connection between sexuality, sin and female fertility served only to strengthen the determination to master both women and nature'.¹³

New Age: this is more of a diffuse tendency than a clear-cut philosophy. Characteristic tenets are (a) spirit beings exist behind all natural phenomena; (b) health, both for individuals and the planet, depends on unblocking energy flows; (c) all spiritual paths are equally valid.

Neo-paganism: pagans celebrate the four Celtic nature festivals (Samhain, 1st November, Imbolc 1st February, Beltane 1st May, and Lughnassadh 1st August) and the solstice and equinox festivals derived from Germanic culture, and they attempt to defend nature by magic.¹⁴ Andy Letcher has described the spirituality of road protesters as an example of pagan ecology: 'Practitioners recognize and celebrate the eight seasonal festivals, honour ancestors and perceive historic sites as holding religious significance, regard the land and its plant and animal inhabitants as sacred, have a vivid belief in the other-world and fairies, practise magic, and honour both

¹³ Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (Burnes and Oates, 1991) p 218.

¹⁴ David Burnett, *Dawning of the Pagan Moon* (Monarch 1991).

male and female deities (in particular Mother Earth or 'Gaia', and the familiar horned god of Wicca)'. Magic, or Wicca, aims to focus energies by means of a ritual conducted while in an altered state of consciousness, to 'protect/empower both threatened land and those attempting to defend it'.¹⁵

A Christian Response

Such forms of spirituality are of course poles apart from Christianity. Nevertheless they should provoke us to ask whether the Christian churches offer a biblically-based spirituality that connects with the concerns of campaigners for the earth. Christians can support and work with others who care for creation, but they also have a witness to bear to their own distinctive faith. God is to be known as transcendent over creation, as well as active in it. Humanity is God's representative, as well as part of creation. So the value of creation, and our value, are both secure in God. We are right to care for creation, not just on creation's behalf, or our own, but as God's active agents. At the heart of the Christian world view is Jesus Christ. Christ binds creation together and ultimately will make all things new. Having dealt with sin by the blood of his cross, He is bringing reconciliation of all parts of the creation to himself (Colossians 1: 20). The desire which so many have for harmony and reconciliation within the creation is already God's desire, and part of his plan, and has in prospect already been accomplished through Christ. The Holy Spirit's hand may be seen in all genuine moves towards a compassionate attitude of care.

The Rev Keith Innes is an Anglican Minister who has long worked at the interface between ecology and theology. His M Phil Thesis at Trinity College Bristol (2000) was entitled *Wilderness in the Old Testament: Narrative, Environment and Interpretation*. His paper *The Old Testament Wilderness in Ecological Perspective* can be downloaded from www.ringmerchurch.org.uk/Keith (please note capital K).

Additional reading to books cited: Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature* (Golgonooza Press 1987) and Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation* (Yale, 1994).

¹⁵ Andy Letcher, 'Gaia Told Me To Do It', *Ecotheology* 8:1 (2003) pp 61-84.

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Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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