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ARTICLE

Caring for the Earth

Why Environmentalism Needs Theology

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The impending environmental crisis is, like all important realities, a theological problem. It is my contention that if we get the theology right, clean air and clean rivers will follow, and the lion may even lie down with the lamb. But much theological work must be done.

We can begin by acknowledging that there are good reasons why Christians, especially biblically formed Christians, are not often called friends of the earth. Many Christians have taken the command, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28), as license for subduing the earth and all other living creatures. Being created in God's image means not only eating first, but eating everything.

Moreover, Christians have historically emphasized the salvation of souls and the future life in heaven. The world's beauty was often thought to be a seduction of the body and a peril to the immortal spark within us that alone is worth saving. Christian Platonism hardly encourages care of the material world. Rather, fleeing the world is the secure path to eternal life.

Finally, many contemporary Christians have an eschatology based on the Book of Revelation that gazes indifferently on the destruction of the world, since the saved will be removed by rapture to occupy a new heaven and earth. This present earth is only a temporary package for the saints. God will crumple it and toss it aside. Seeking to preserve the earth and its resources is a denial of the great cataclysm that awaits us.

Ecological blindness isn't entirely the fault of the Bible or Christian theology, though. Christians lived for centuries with these or similar views of the soul and the transience of the world, yet at the same time in remarkable harmony with other creatures. The outstanding example is monasticism. Benedictine monks subscribed to a form of *fuga mundi* (fleeing the world) and certainly sought to save their souls, but their life within "the school of the Lord's service" was intimately attuned to the rhythm of God's time and the contours of God's creation. When Benedict instructed his monks to treat the land and the tools with which they worked as they did the vessels of the altar, he inculcated a far-reaching and pervasive sense of piety toward material things as well as toward the soul. Such monastic virtues, in fact, were once blamed for the failure of the world to develop technologically, and for humanity's failure to achieve its Promethean ambition.

Indeed, material exploitation and despoliation are far more the result of attitudes that have developed in opposition to classical Christian tenets. It is the spirit of Enlightenment rationality, after all, that seeks to demystify everything, reduce mystery to problem, magic to statistics. Cartesian dualism did more than Christian mysticism to cultivate the perception of the body as a machine and the world as the mind's laboratory. Above all, it has been the spirit of capitalism-fundamentally at odds with the classical Christian ideal of sharing possessions-that has fostered competitive acquisition as the measure of human success, and has succeeded in reducing all things material and spiritual to commodities.

More than anything else, the effects of technological revolution and the human population explosion have fundamentally altered the relation between humans and the rest of creation. The impact our insatiable growth and consumption have on the survivability, not only of every other species of life, but (to speak in the most selfish manner possible) of the human species as well is something we are still trying to comprehend. The impact could not be understood even a hundred years ago, when the consequences of the human drive for power, pleasure, and possession, abetted by astonishing technology, and multiplied by swarming populations, could not yet be imagined. Nature seemed still to be infinitely vast, infinitely rich and varied in life and resource, even infinitely frightening compared to human cunning. We could not yet then leap to space, and look down on our beloved planet as a stunningly beautiful yet suddenly fragile blue marble.

If there is not a direct cause-and-effect link between Christian sensibility and ecological indifference, it is nevertheless true that Christians now bear a distinctive responsibility for responding to the environmental crisis. First, there are more Christians in the world than adherents of any other religion. What Christians think and do matters. If they continue on the path of destruction, the earth will be destroyed. If they turn about, there may be hope. Second, of all the world's religions, Christianity has uniquely been corrupted by the spirit of modernity, that combination of Enlightenment reason, technology, individualism, commodification, and consumerism. American Christians have lost any awareness of the classic critique of precisely these idolatrous impulses in Scripture, and have blithely-I will not say innocently-merged Christianity into Americanism.

Christianity is, moreover, the dominant religious influence in precisely the part of the world most responsible for the despoliation of the earth's resources. Too many Christians in the West live in a manner that reduces other humans to economic slavery and depletes the earth's resources, justifying heedless consumption in the name of Christian (American) values like individualism, competition, or even the Gospel of Prosperity. Nevertheless, Christians have the ability, precisely because of their privileged position, to change such patterns of consumption as well as such perverse understandings of their religious heritage. In fact, it is a Christian obligation to do so.

Such a change, or conversion, is not a matter of issuing apologies or engaging in symbolic protests. Nor does it suffice for each of us to do his or her little bit by recycling. The change required is massive. It involves a change of mind as well as a change of attitude.

Christians must engage in the difficult task of theological self-criticism, acknowledging those elements in our understanding that have led to these consequences, and engaging those elements in our sacred texts that have too long gone unexamined. Conversion demands the painful work of hermeneutics, inquiring into both the moral implications of our texts and the contemporary moral attitudes that allow us to read them responsibly or irresponsibly.

Conversion also demands a change of communal practices. The church, as the body of Christ, must become a laboratory of a life consonant with the care of the earth as God's creation. The church must learn, advocate, and cultivate practices that-at the very least-respect the precarious balance between the earth and all living creatures. The church as an embodied community must also be a good citizen of the world community, engaging the politics of that world as a good and honest advocate for the earth. The church cannot be content with avoiding environmental criminality, or even practicing environmental virtue. It must lead in being a friend of the earth.

The church can hardly do this as long as its own self-understanding and way of life are based more on the individualism and consumerism of an increasingly unrestrained capitalistic world order than on the gospel. Churches must measure their success in terms that imitate the messiah rather than mimic the market. We must choose spiritual fruitfulness rather than size, service rather than dominance, maturity of life rather than growth in numbers, suffering in solidarity rather than prosperity as the sign of blessing.

The contemporary environmental crisis is, at root, a crisis in Christian identity. In the Nicene Creed, Christians profess belief in one God, the maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. Belief in God as creator is fundamental to all other Christian profession, not least the Resurrection of Jesus, for the two beliefs are intimately connected. Many Christians, though, have an impoverished view of creation. Two errors are at work. First, contemporary Christians are strongly influenced by deism; they see God as the cosmic watchmaker who wound up the mechanism and now just observes it ticking. Second, our theology of creation too often relies on only the first chapters of Genesis ("in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"). Creation is thought of as something that happened once as a chronological event, or maybe better, as an event that began chronology.

Among other mistakes, these distorted perspectives give rise to the bizarre phenomenon known as creation-science, which tries to read the profound mythic accounts in Genesis-which testify to the most profound truth about creation, that everything that exists comes from God-in terms of natural science and ends up botching both religious and scientific truth. And because such a reading is often driven by a fear of the theory of evolution, the temptation is even greater to view creation simply as a product, delivered perfect and complete by God within six days (however calculated). The seventh day on which God rested is, in this view, a signal that God's creative activity is finished. The world is now in the hands of humans to whom God has given dominion.

A more adequate theology of creation begins not with Genesis but with the Psalms, and with the biblical confession of God as the Living God. The Psalms also speak of God's creating the world, not in the distant past, but new every day. Psalm 104:27-35 says,

These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give it to them they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. May the glory of the Lord endure forever, may the Lord rejoice in his works, who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke...bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!

The Psalms see creation as the world coming-into-being by the power of God.

Scripture also speaks of God as the living God and as the lifegiver, not in the past, but in the present. The spirit that hovered over the abyss in Genesis is active throughout the story of Israel, in the story of Jesus, and in our story today. This is the Holy Spirit who renews the hearts of humans and renews the earth. It is this understanding of creation that enables Paul to compare the Resurrection of Jesus to creation: "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence that which is not" has raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:17, 24). It is more than a comparison: Paul speaks of the Resurrection of Jesus as a "new creation"; by it Jesus becomes, not simply a living being like the first Adam, but becomes "life-giving Spirit."

If we think of creation existentially rather than mechanically, then we can acknowledge that all creatures come into being at every moment by the power of God. All creatures are held out of nothingness at every second by an unseen power, their growth and change and development, and yes, their evolution, are all the exciting process of coming into being that has never ceased since God first announced, "Let there be light." We do not pretend to understand how God brings all that is becoming out of nothingness into being, but we confess that such is the case, and that it makes all the difference.

The implications of this theology of creation are fourfold. First, if God creates the world at every moment, if creation is an ongoing process, then, as the Psalmist says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it" (Ps 24:1). The world that God brings into being belongs to him and none other. It is answerable to him and none other. It is constantly a gift from God and never becomes another's possession. The corollary of this truth:

however we understand ourselves as being created in the image of God, or being set over the works of God's hands, it does not mean that ownership of the earth has passed to us, or that we can dispose of it without reference to the one whose power brings it-and us-out of nothingness into existence moment by moment. The earth is not a human possession but rather a fellow creature. It is not an object to be manipulated simply for human gratification, a plaything or factory for us alone, but a gift that is given moment by moment. Note how such a perception helps us appreciate the human creativity in science that enhances the work of creation (as in the healing power of medicine) while also providing a boundary for such legitimate manipulation.

Second, there is a wonderful equality among creatures, for at the level of existence, the smallest molecule is as real and valuable as the tallest mountain. At the level of coming-into-being out of nothingness, humans and dolphins truly are brothers and sisters, equally gifted by God with being, equally fragile in that existence; no more than the dolphin can any human add an inch to his or her stature or a moment to his or her life. We are not so much arranged in the world in a hierarchy of being as we dance in this world within a vast and interconnected web of existence, all of it dependent and interdependent, all of it coming forth at once from the same source, the all-powerful creator God.

Third, the world is the medium of God's self-expression. God as spirit chooses to make that which is not spirit, and through the medium of matter to make Godself known as spirit! How can we then not see the created universe as God's self-expression, the body that God uses to accomplish God's purposes? The implication of this is that the earth itself is able to reveal God. The Psalmist sings, "The heavens are telling the glory of God"- that is, the presence and power of God-"and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Ps 19:1-4). The entire biblical conception of revelation is based on the revelatory capacity of creation, for in creating the earth God shows that spirit is paradigmatically expressed through matter. What is true of covenant, of prophecy, and of incarnation, is true first of all in creation itself. Or better: covenant, prophecy, and incarnation are all expressions of creation itself as God's ongoing activity. If God creates by a word, then the earth itself is articulate. It speaks its creator in its very coming into being.

Fourth, God demands that we affirm a certain attitude toward all other creatures. If the earth is not ours but the Lord's, and if the material world is God's chosen medium of self-expression, then we are called to respond with reverence and awe, with attentive listening. If God seeks to declare a word to us from within the coming into being of all things, then must we not gaze at all things with eyes that are receptive and grateful, rather than calculating and measuring? Should we not listen to the earth with ears that are alert to the whispers of God's presence and power, rather than fill our ears with the din of noise and the clatter of our own voices? In this theology of creation, the despoliation of the earth is revealed as a form of blasphemy.

In light of this more robust theology of creation, other Scripture texts appear in new light. For example, Genesis has two creation accounts. In the first, which I quoted in the beginning of this essay, God creates humans, male and female, in God's image, precisely so that they might have "dominion" over other creatures. After creating them, God commands them to multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (1:26-30). But in the second creation account, humans are in a much humbler position. Adam is shaped out of the clay of the earth, and Eve from his side. Adam is placed by God in a garden, "to till it and keep it" (2:15). Note both terms: to achieve what God desires, the human creature must till while preserving the earth that has been given to be tended.

In this account, moreover, Adam is not given leave to eat from any seed-bearing plant on the earth, as in the first story (1:29), but is told, "you may eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (2:17). Adam's use of the earth is circumscribed by God's commandments, for the earth is God's, not Adam's. Adam is simply the tender of the garden. Furthermore, not all knowledge is life-giving. Eating some fruit leads to death. In this account, Adam

This astonishing passage challenges us directly and forcefully. How much closer to desolating the earth has our lack of true knowledge and true fear of the Lord brought us! How much more do we need the spirit of wisdom, if we are not only to dream of the lion resting with the lamb, but even to dream of there being lions as well as lambs on the earth.

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1. Explain the four implications of this theology of creation.
2. How has the environmental crisis been caused by faulty of Genesis, Platonism, and eschatology?
3. How have the three philosophies which developed in opposition to classical Christianity (Enlightenment rationality, Cartesian dualism, and capitalism) contribute to the environmental crisis?
4. How has monasticism developed a positive attitude toward the earth?
5. How does Scripture show that God has never stopped creating?
6. How has the technological revolution and human population growth affected the environment?