

Biblical Perspectives on the Ecology Crises

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INTRODUCTION

Is There a Crisis?

Professor Kenneth Hare of the University of Toronto recently answered the question¹ by dividing people and publications into 3 categories. First, and perhaps most vocal today, are the alarmists, many of whom are profiting immensely by writing and speaking on a kind of apocalyptic level, who see the technological society as having created a monster which, if unchecked, will swallow up both man and nature within a few short years. Hare suggests that much of this group's concern is with what he calls "nuisance pollution", i.e., the kind of thing like cloud or smog factors created by man in a city resulting in a slightly decreased aesthetic or comfort state, but hardly a major threat to life.

A second group consists of those who attempt to debunk the whole pollution effort. There is still land for more people, there are still many resources for development, and we have always been able to develop new methods and resources when the old were exhausted. After all, when coal supplies ran short, we hardly noticed the loss. Why not recognize that new forms of energy, new synthetic materials for construction, new ways of increasing our ability to feed ourselves, and new social structures making it possible for even greater,

numbers to live on this planet are all just around the corner?

In a third group (the golden mean) Hare places himself. His concern is with what he calls "transcendent" pollution--i.e., the relatively few but vitally important factors that affect not one area but the entire ecosphere. In such a category he would include the population explosion, the problem of non-renewable resources, and the problem of atmospheric and water pollutants now present in the world-wide system of the earth's surface. It is not my purpose to referee this debate. Rather, I should like to suggest that, whatever our view of the seriousness of the problem, there is an area in which we must develop a response. Even the most optimistic 'de-bunker' of the ecology crisis is functioning on the basis of a philosophy--usually a philosophy built on an unlimited confidence in man and his ability to control his own destiny. And, because our response inevitably involves values, and values in our Judeo-Christian society have always related to Biblical religion, I feel we can and should begin our search for a value-structure at that point. Especially for us, as evangelicals, there is a mandate for a fresh look at our sources, partially because they are under attack in ecological circles, but more basically because we purport to find in them "all things necessary for life and godliness".

What then does the Bible say to guide our response to the problems of ecology? Does it speak with a clear voice in favor of concern or does it, perchance, leave us in the embarrassing position of 'drop-out' from the company of the concerned, or worse yet, does it provide us with a mandate for exploitation of the worst sort? To these questions my paper will attempt an answer.

Approach to the Crisis: Ecological or Theological?

Perhaps at this point we should pause to consider the criticism of the "theological strategy" offered by

Prof. Richard Wright in a recent article.² Dr. Wright suggests that an "ecological strategy" (i.e., educate people to see that a proper use of their environment is beneficial in terms of their own quality of life) is more effective than a theological one, as Christian churches have neither the ability to agree on a particular theological strategy, nor the ability to influence the secular majority in our society. The theological approach must be, therefore, merely a supplement to the more pragmatic, realistic appeal to self-preservation which secular man can understand.

I question whether one can separate the two, even to the limited extent proposed by Dr. Wright. If ecological decisions are to be made at all they must be made in the context of a human value system. Who is to say that self-preservation is a strong enough motive for action, especially when, for those in affluent parts of the world, it usually is a problem of assuring the next generation's survival not our own? What will convince the consumer of wood and paper, the traveler in his fume-spewing automobile, or the land-speculator protecting his investment that to modify his behavior severely is necessary? I suggest that a theological conviction, though traditionally limited in its appeal, may make more sense in the context of an increasingly apocalyptic debate than even the appeal to an enlightened self-interest. Though we may never convert the world, we may, as Christians, better set our own response and activity in the context of a Biblical world-view, and thus convince contemporary leaders to follow after what we believe is good. It was not, after all, through the conversion of all England that Granville Sharpe, William Wilberforce and John Newton brought about the end of child labor and the slave trade. It was rather by formulating a course of action growing out of a Christian world-view, convincing themselves and some influential contemporaries of its rightness, and

then seeking legislation on the subject. Thus, I opt for a theological approach. But, which theology shall we espouse? At least three options are available and I shall discuss them in turn.

Theological Approaches

1. *Attack the Judeo-Christian tradition.* Attacks on the Judeo-Christian tradition and its view of nature are by now familiar to most of us. Wright (and others) quotes Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*³ in which man's "bulldozer mentality" is traced to Genesis 1 and its alleged "sanction and injunction to conquer nature--the enemy, the threat to Jehovah". We shall have more to say presently about this kind of reasoning; suffice it to note for the moment that such a charge is certainly open to question, Biblically if not also historically.

2. *Modify the Judeo-Christian tradition.* Not all attacks on Biblical theology have come from outside the Christian church. It is significant that Lynn White, in some ways the father of modern discussion of the subject, recognized that the roots of the problem were religious and himself claims to be a faithful churchman.⁴ His thoughts on the subject have been reprinted in the *Journal ASA* and the questionable nature of their claim to represent Christian dogma faithfully has already been examined.⁵ However, it should be noted that many who claim to follow the Christian tradition are, in one way or another, supporting the contention made by White. A United Church minister in Vancouver recently called for a rejection of Genesis 1 as the basis of a new theology. On a more academic level, Frederick Elder, a Presbyterian minister, in his book *Crisis in Eden*⁶, has zeroed in on the so-called "J" account of creation, as contained in Genesis 2:4b ff., with its anthropocentric view of the world, as the real culprit. Elder sees some hope for redemption in the "P" document from Ch. 1 (despite its offensive vv. 26-27), an account in which

man is at least placed on some equal level with other parts of creation. Man is at least chronologically last in the "P" version, in opposition to the "J" document wherein Adam is first to appear and he then names the animals (a very significant function in light of Hebrew psychology surrounding the name.)

Elder goes on to divide mankind, and especially theological mankind, into two groups. The "exclusionists", represented by such "traditional" Christians as Harvey Cox, Herbert Richardson, and Teilhard de Chardin, advocate the kind of anthropocentrism of Genesis 2. To them man is king, his technology represents the height of redemption from the old "sacred grove" concept, wherein God and nature were never distinguished, and his dominance of the physical world is but a step in the direction of the ultimate kingdom of

God. Of course, there are major differences among such thinkers as I have mentioned, and Elder would be the first to acknowledge such, but all have in common a view that God has somehow ordained that man shall be the master of nature and, as its despot (whether benevolent or otherwise is debated) does the work of God in subduction of what is basically a godless and hostile entity.

His second group, styled the "inclusionists", represents Elder himself, along with such Christian and marginally Christian thinkers as George H. Williams, McHarg, Rachel Carson, and Loren Eiseley. Theologically he finds roots of the position in Calvin and H. R. Niebuhr, in each of whom there is present that holy regard for Mother Earth that Rudolf Otto has called a "sense of the numinous".

Elder is suggesting that Christian theology must rid itself of its anthropocentrism and begin to see the earth as a self-contained biosphere in which man is little more than a plant parasite (to use McHarg's terminology). He must see himself no longer as custodian of but rather a "part" of the environment. Along with this dethroning, or more properly abdication, of the king of the earth, will come a fresh sense of man's worth as an individual, unique in his ability to perceive eternity in various forms of natural history, and set over against a view of man as the collective, the mechanical, the technical master of the world's fate. In short, there must remain in man that mysterious sense of wonder as he stands before the burning bush, though that bush be the heart of a simple seed.⁷

A critique of such a view must consider first whether it is Biblical and second, whether it has drawn adequate and accurate conclusions from the sources it has used. Turning to the second point first, I would contend that Otto's "sense of the numinous" is by no means restricted to persons with a so-called "biocentric" world view, nor

is there any real conflict between a truly Biblical anthropocentricity and the concern for ecology Elder sets forth as a goal. Certainly Calvin, for one, quoted by Elder as having an "inclusionist's" sense of wonder at creation, was firmly in the anthropocentric camp when he wrote "as it was chiefly for the sake of mankind that the world was made, we must look to this as the end which God has in view in the government of it."⁸ Although any attempt to see in Calvin the concerns of modern ecology is doomed beforehand, there is still here a valid example of what I should like to show as a Biblical anthropocentrism combined with the necessary attitudes for dealing with today's heightened concerns.

Elder's view has many other problems, but rather than offer a critique of Elder I will suggest a Biblical alternative. Let me say at the start that I am convinced that all talk of man's abdication, of a biospheric world-view, and of a sense of mere equality with the animal and plant world is not Biblical, Christian, or practical. In the appeal to St. Francis of Assisi, in the blur created between man and nature and in the almost personalization of the natural world one senses more than a hint of a pantheistic response. I suggest that, in a Biblical view, nature has a derived dignity as the separate and subordinate creation of a transcendent God. Man has his God-given role as under-Lord, as manager and keeper, and is possessed of a cultural mandate which includes submission of any hostile forces and just as importantly, dominion over friendly forces. In this he is a partner with God who created him and, were it not for the Fall into sin (which Elder and most theological writers on the subject seem to ignore), he might have brought about the kingdom of God on earth and found out the deepest secrets of his biosphere en route.

BIBLICAL VIEW

God

Any Biblical perspective on ecology must begin with a Biblical view of God. In this sense, a Biblical world view is really theocentric rather than either anthropocentric or biocentric. Significantly, Genesis 1 begins this point and I argue that any value system or truth structure without such a starting point must quickly reduce to subjectivity. The very extent to which nature is meaningful, whether in a pantheistic, animistic, or Christian sense, is a derivative of the view of God espoused. The God of the Bible is a God who is there prior to any and all creation. Though He can stoop to converse with his creatures (witness the anthropomorphisms of Genesis 2, to say nothing of the incarnation of Jesus Christ) he is still consistently presented as above and beyond any and all of his works. In a masterful summary delivered on the Areopagus in Athens, St. Paul said of this God that He made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24). He is the source of life, breath and everything else and He is the determining force in created history, but never can be reduced to any spatial context that man can identify and enshrine. Thus, our love of nature must be in the context of it as the handiwork of the Almighty and not as some part of God (i.e., pantheism).

Such a view is important because it has not always been universally held, and we are in position to examine the results of alternate views. It should be self-evident that such a view of a Creator-God endows nature as well as man with a real dignity, but dignity for nature, at least, can also be derived from pantheism. But what are the implications if we lower God to the level of nature or raise nature to the level of God?

We have a model for this in the Babylonian view of the universe. "Enuma Elish", representing Babylonian cosmology in the 3rd and 2nd millenium before Christ,

has the usual pagan pantheon, but the notable fact is that the world was created out of certain gods and each element in the universe furthermore represented the personality and will of a particular deity. Thus, deriving from its view of god, the society came to view nature not as an "it" but a "Thou".⁹ Such language, reproduced on a more sophisticated plane, and overlaid with a residual Judeo-Christian world-view, is seen again in many of Elder's favorite "inclusionists", and even Lynn White himself seems to long for the good old days when the groves were sacred.

For the Christian, however, God must be the God of creation. The grove may be perceived as a wonder of order and beauty, but it must never be given the robe of divine dignity. Its meaning to man must be derived from the fact of its createdness rather than its essence. Its mystery must be that God has created it and given it properties for man to study and marvel at,

but never worship or fear. For the Babylonians no such confidence in the grove existed. It was feared, not appreciated. It was irregular and capricious in its personality, not in any sense the ordered subject of scientific investigation we know today. It possessed a sense of authority, but even that authority was no guarantee against the sudden return of chaos. All of this, which we call cosmology, is clearly dependent on one's view of God, and I can hardly emphasize sufficiently the force and majesty of the Hebrew concept of a dependable and transcendent Creator as presented in Genesis chapter 1.

Nor is the transcendence of God absent in the so-called 2nd account of creation. In Genesis 2:4 we find God again completely in control of His work, creating (lit: "making"; Hebrew *'asah*) the earth and the heavens. No primitive mythology is here; rather there is a God who can be close to his creation and even direct its affairs personally, but who Himself is above it, beyond it and outside it. Again the view of the world is theocentric rather than anthropocentric or biocentric. It is this God who tells Adam to till and keep the garden.

Nature

The inclusionists" tell us we must rid ourselves of Biblical views of nature and return to a kind of neo-panteism, a resurrection of the sacred grove, which has to mean some kind of independent element of deity within the natural order. But what is the Biblical view? Is nature a worthless mass of material to be exploited and left to rot as man sates himself in luxury, while trampling underfoot his environment? Some would have us believe that this is the implication in Genesis 1:26-28. Elder attempts to convince us that the Biblical picture degrades nature at the expense of exalting man, but does the Genesis account actually reflect such a state of affairs?

We have already seen in both Genesis accounts that the created order is radically separate from God. Up to the sixth day, with its creation of man, each natural element brought into being finds its meaning in fulfilling a role cast for it in the benevolent order of things. Light dispels darkness and we have day. The firmament keeps the waters separated. The dry land provides a platform for vegetation which in turn feeds all the living creatures. The seas become in their turn an environment for the fish and swarming creatures. The two great lights rule (or give order to) the principle parts of the cycle: day and night. And finally man, as the highest of the created order, serves to keep all of the rest in order, functioning smoothly. In fact, it is in Genesis 1 with its penchant for order and its transcendent and over-arching concept of a purposeful universe, that a truly balanced cosmological system can be found--and this in the very document that is supposed to downgrade nature by its command for man to subdue and have dominion. In this document creation is seen as orderly (note the structure in the chapter), it is repeatedly stated to be good, and it is throughout seen to be serving a great and noble purpose.

Genesis 2 has relatively little to add, as it is, fundamentally, a treatise on the nature of man and his meaning in the structure. However, contrary again to what we might expect in an "anthropocentric" account¹⁰ Genesis 2 also argues for a healthy respect for environment. Indeed for most ecologists who concern themselves with the Bible at all, Genesis 2 is more palatable than Gen. 1. Here the garden is full of "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (v. 9). Here man's mandate is even expressed in more ecologically desirable terms. No longer is he to conquer and subdue, but rather to "till (lit: work) and guard (Hebr: *shamar*, keep)" the treasure entrusted to him. True, its value is cast in terms of its usefulness for man, but at least

one tree had a value totally separate from any use man was to make of it. Note however, that Harvey Cox and Herbert Richardson, with their anthropocentric universe, are really closer to the mark here than is Elder and his so-called "biocentrists", though neither has grasped the full fact that theocentrism must precede either second option. Cox and Richardson sometimes lose sight of the fact that it is the garden of God, not Adam, no matter how central Adam may appear in the story.

Further testimony to the value and wonder of nature is not wanting in other parts of scripture. There is the familiar and majestic Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork. . ." Add to this the prologue of Psalm 8--"When I consider Thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained--What is man. . ." Or Psalm 104, a marvelous Creation hymn in which nature's beauties are celebrated so graphically, but the whole is carefully set in a context pointing to man's utilization of nature as the real purpose of all its beauty and productivity. The springs in the valleys give drink to the beasts of the field and the earth is satisfied with the fruit of God's creative works. But all is ultimately for the service of man (v. 14) whether directly (as when man drinks water) or eventually (as in the wine and bread made from the plants which drink from the springs). Any suggestion that the relationship is exploitive or that nature is degraded by relegation to a utilitarian function is, of course, nonsensical. It is only when man's greed and lack of appreciation of his own proper role becomes a factor that nature is trampled underfoot. In fact, again nature's real meaning comes from her role in the sphere of created orders, and in her proper role she shines. One final word should be said on the destiny of the natural world. Biblical theology is well aware that we

live in no pristine Garden of Eden and that we are not likely to restore such a paradise, as things now stand. The reasons for this I discuss in more detail presently. But the Biblical writers never lost sight of the fact that God's original purpose for nature was that it should freely reflect His glory in a state of untrammelled beauty. Man was, from the beginning, to be the center of this paradise, and all things were to function in a harmonious relationship to man. Thus, when the prophet Isaiah speaks of the new heavens and new earth, (ch. 65:17) his covenant includes terms for harmony within both plant and animal kingdom: vineyards bear fruit, wolf and lamb feed together and none hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. This ideal of a cosmic element in redemption, combining the theme of creation from

Genesis and that of redemption from Exodus, is nowhere more pronounced than in the later chapters of Isaiah and is taken up in Paul's letter to the Romans, Ch. 8 vv. 19-25. There the whole creation is seen with an earnest or eager longing (lit: an uplifted head in expectation) for the day when she shall be freed from bondage and obtain liberty to function without her present decay. Just when this shall become a reality, and particularly the relation it has to our own environmental efforts, is not clear. What it does say is that God's purpose for the natural world is not abandoned, and the very "hope" which is here expressed for the natural order should lend continuing dignity to our efforts in the field of ecology. When we work to free nature from some of the effects of man's sin we are upholding that which is "good" in God's sight, and expressing a commitment to a program which will find its consummation in some form of eschatological kingdom of God. That we can never hope to complete the process no more renders the charge futile than does our inability to finally eliminate poverty, racism, broken homes, or disease. In fact, by the demonstration of a Christian concern we are witnesses to the continued expression of God's ultimate purposes in the world.

Man

The key to the discussion lies in a theology of man. We have already sensed that the fly in the ecological ointment is man himself--his greed, his self-centered economic motivation, his desire for the kind of "freedom" which regards any restraints as odious.

For the inclusionists the answer seems to be found in reducing man to the level of nature, in ridding him of this Biblical anthropocentrism where he sees himself as something inherently of more value than "many sparrows". My own, and I think the Bible's, answer lies in quite the opposite direction. Both creation accounts place man at the pinnacle of creation, whether in terms

of its climactic event (as in Ch. 1) or its primary intermediary (Ch. 2, in which man is first formed and then completes creation through his naming of the animals). In the former account he is given dominion which separates him from the animals and is thus a primary element in working out the *imago dei* within him. Thus, by his creation, he already represents the highest potential for biological development and we may not, with Loren Eiseley, expect that something greater may yet come along.

As the highest form of the created order, he is to be lord of nature, not part of it. Herein lies the origin of science and technology, and the inclusionists seem at times to be calling for a return to the state existing prior to the neolithic revolution, where man would again take his place as a gatherer and predator, but would abandon his role as organizer, producer, and planner. Such an option is, of course, a practical impossibility, as I'm sure most inclusionists would admit. We simply know too much science and technology, and furthermore we have the brainpower to duplicate the process again, even if rolled back to square zero by some catastrophic event.

But what are the Biblical restraints on man in his lordly role? I think herein lies the key. Herein is the forgotten element in most of human development, herein is the weakness in any truly anthropocentric world-view. For, as C. F. D. Moule has so cogently pointed out in his small but weighty book, *Man and Nature in the NT*,¹¹ man is never seen just as lord, but as lord under God. Moule uses the term *vice-regent* or sub-manager. Man derives his meaning from God whose program, though it from the beginning offered man the kingdom, included a recognition of God's ultimate lordship over all creation and saw man as a responsible steward, not an independent tyrant. Every tree of the garden was given to man, but there were rules. Dominion was given (never, by the way, as a license to exploit

but it was dominion within (as Elder himself points out) a created order, the violation of which would naturally lead to imbalance and disaster. There is no such thing for Biblical man as unlimited freedom unlimited rights. His freedom is that of the operator of a beautifully functioning machine. As long as he treats the machine with respect and uses it in a way consistent with the functions and properties of the machine, he may continue to exercise his managerial function with no problems. But when he ignores the rules and decides he can ignore the complexities of his machine and the instructions left by its maker, his freedom is lost and he becomes the destroyer both of the machine and his own function as its lord.

Now man, through his overthrow of the rules (Biblically summarized in Genesis 3) has brought slavery both to himself and his universe. Of course, enough of God's image remains within him so that he can still exercise a powerful technical control and he can for a while appear to be creating a kingdom of his own quite independently of that kingdom promised "where dwelleth righteousness". But now the books on the city of man are beginning to be audited, and it appears that this city has one grave and mortal fault. It simply cannot overcome the selfish desires of its own citizens, even when those desires threaten to destroy the whole kingdom.

The options we are given are all insufficient. Ecologists (and Richard Wright) appeal to self-preservation but existence without meaning becomes a farce. Lynn White, Richard Means and others seem to be calling for man to abdicate his role as king of the world, but this would simply leave the whole process with no government.

I believe the only real solution is to restore the created order that freedom it lost, by freeing men from their bondage to sin and self and then showing how

they, in turn, may progressively set their environment free from the bondage into which it has been placed. This will demand a realistic view of man's problem and perhaps the Achilles Heel of almost all modern theological attempts at solution is that they discuss creation in terms of Gen. 1 and 2, but ignore Gen. 3.

In setting a man free Jesus Christ did not promise instant return to paradise. Though the head of the serpent has been bruised, thorns and thistles continue to come forth, I do not believe we will ever see a real ecological, or social harmony, until that day when the glorious liberty of the children of God shall become universal for all creation. But let us never forget that in Christ, we are already free, and we can, despite the weaknesses of the "flesh", begin to demonstrate our freedom by applying it to the many institutions of our

social order. Christians have often failed to live as free men (hence the continued presence of race prejudice and materialism among us) but where they have grasped the meaning of redemption (as witness the Clapham Sect in England or the Abolitionist preachers of New England), the effect on their world has been magnificent. The kingdom of God still awaits an eschatological consummation, but this has never prevented citizens of that kingdom from acting out in this kingdom the principles of that other. And the unique Biblical fact is that in some mysterious sense, that new order, the new heaven and the new earth, seem to be a re-creation or restoration of that order we now know! What exactly is the connection I cannot tell, but the very fact of the identification lends tremendous force and dignity to my weakest efforts at freeing this order from its bondage to sin.

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