

## Religious Models for Environmentalism: Rediscovery or Retrofitting?

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I HAVE TWO LODESTARS to guide me in my understanding of religious environmentalism. The first is reverence for the integrity of the Word in Christian tradition. The second is respect for the natural sciences.

### I.

The first comes easily to me as a child of the Reformed tradition and is particularly apt in this setting, an honored seat of Christian learning in that tradition, and the occasion of celebrating the memory of a famous Reformed theologian. I acknowledge (or confess) that I was raised in the liberal wing of that tradition and thus am far from being a Scriptural conservative. But I admit to a lasting reverence for the Word and for its place in thought, in life, and in worship. Once in a service of the Reformed Church of France I heard the pastor begin his prayers, appropriately I thought, "O Lord, we thank thee for thy Word, which once again gathers us about itself."

Certainly study, interpretation, and reflection can yield much which is not apparent to a first reading. My Puritan forebears are famous for believing that the Lord has yet fresh light to break forth from his Holy Word. But there are, nevertheless, limits to what one can legitimately find there. Not that these limits have not been transgressed by many a sect and cult and private self-anointed prophet with a new message requiring biblical legitimation. I will forbear from naming the obvious examples. We are surely entitled to say, as a matter of intellectual honesty, that the integrity of the text must be respected. The late Will Herberg imagined someone coming to you saying he had discovered Shakespeare and was now reading Hamlet. "Oh," you might respond, "been reading Hamlet, eh? What's it about?" And your friend would say, "It's about a Chinese merchant traveling in Spain." Well, you are entitled to say, are you not, that either he has Chinese merchants and Spain on the brain, or he is not reading Hamlet. So also the interpretation of the Bible has its limits.

I bring up this subject, with its long and contentious history, because we are now confronted in environmental ethics with a self-conscious movement

bent on revising traditional biblical concepts to serve an understanding of ecology developed from entirely non-biblical sources. It is deliberate revisionism, although I prefer to call it retrofitting. Revisionism comes out of a study of the text, starts with the text, and through careful study finds new meanings. Retrofitting comes out of a secular concern, starts with a secular goal, and goes back to the text with the intent to make it support that goal.

Examples abound, often taking the form of argument by extension of the biblical text to include more than is actually warranted by the original meaning. Larry Rasmussen, for instance, has written that the command to love our neighbors must be "extended" to nature, even inorganic nature, to our "non-human neighbors," our "co-siblings of creation."<sup>1</sup> For another example the model of Christ as servant, as in the *kenosis* passage in Philippians, is now taken as a paradigm for our treatment of the natural world, not just for our relations with each other (which is the original context).<sup>2</sup> That there is no reference here to nature seems not to bother the new interpreters. Still another example is the way biblical concern with human justice is "extended" (once again) to include a command to save the earth. To save the poor and oppressed means not only poor *people* but "the poor embattled earth."<sup>3</sup> The temptation to commit such "metaphorical extension" exists even in some surprising places. Not too long ago I gave a talk at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, after which a respondent who was a member of their faculty used just that phrase, "metaphorical extension" (albeit with what I thought was a guilty smile), to apply Jesus' mission to nature. With some naughty relish (given the scriptural conservatism of the seminary), I reminded him to "beware of metaphorical extension."

A more promising line for this school is to stress certain passages, which are suggestive for their viewpoint but which have been less prominent in the great tradition of the classic creeds. The Bible is, after all, a multiform work, with many different lines of thought. One such favorite passage is Romans 8:19-22, where Paul says "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility . . . the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has

<sup>1</sup> In *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> Loren Wilkinson, et al, *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991, pp. 12, 289-99; Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990, pp. 120-21.

<sup>3</sup> Alberto Munera, S.J., "New Theology on Population, Ecology, and Overconsumption from the Catholic Perspective," in *Visions of a New Earth*, ed. Howard Coward and Daniel C. Maguire. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, pp. 65-66.

been groaning in travail together until now . . . .” If your goal is to establish an independent value for nonhuman nature, you may read this passage as showing that God cares equally for the natural world as for humankind. I read it as confessing the presence of natural evil, a statement that nature is not unambiguously our friend. To the retrofitters it means more reverence for nature and its independent standing. I think it means the amorality of nature which beckons us to scientific study and careful management.

Another suggestive passage popular with these re-doers of the tradition is Colossians 1, where the Son is said to be the image of God, the first-born of all creation, in whom the fullness of God dwells, and through whom God will reconcile to Himself “all things, whether on earth or in heaven”—again, the theme of cosmic redemption. But, I note, the text quite clearly does not give a valuation of nature parallel to a concern for human life; it says that “all things” await reconciliation with God, i.e., that there is cosmic imperfection, or fallenness, perhaps, if we accept that original creation cannot have been faulty.

A third text which has drawn the attention of this school is Rev. 21:1, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more”—an apocalyptic vision of “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven.” The words here may be understood metaphorically in support of the desired cosmic redemption theme, yes, but not in any sense which values the natural world on a par with humanity. Moreover, I am not at all sure how closely we should accredit the details of what is after all an apocalyptic vision. There is much in the book of Revelation, which we would surely want to treat at arm’s length, and the uses to which it has been put by some of our contemporary apocalypticists should be a warning.

Still another suggestive story is that of Noah, who, the retrofitters note, took *all* the animals into the ark, even the lowliest, deeming them all worthy of being saved, as the Lord commanded.<sup>4</sup> But not so, I observe; for Noah took only breeding pairs, leaving most animals, quite innocent though they were, to perish in the flood. This looks to me like stewardly animal husbandry on Noah’s part, where a human behaves responsibly toward the natural world by managing it.

It is not difficult to find many other texts, which may be suggestive of the idea of a sacred cosmos, or a cosmos worthy of redemption and thus valuable in its own right. Many a Psalm may be quoted, e.g. Ps. 104, where the work

<sup>4</sup> Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, p. 122.

of God in creation is limned in delicious detail, right down to trees, grass, and rocks, useful for all creatures. There is Isaiah’s vision of the messianic age, where “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . and the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . [and] they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain . . .” (Is. 11: 6 ff.) That would certainly be a complete transformation of nature’s normal and usual “killing fields.” There is also much in the book of Job, which suggests that God has purposes for nature apart from humanity.

We could continue thus, but sooner or later the question of poetic meaning will impose itself. One would hardly expect nature metaphors to be absent from the Bible—it is full of them, as befits the setting of its writers (although the Revelation passage, exceptionally, is urban!). But we will have to allow for some degree of poetic license, else we shall stumble badly over lines like “All the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Is. 55:12).” I believe we can understand in a general way that these passages reflect the doctrine of creation, the imperfection of the world, as we know it, and the hope of divine resolution at the end of days. But to go further, and claim that they make God’s way with the natural world equal to the story of God with humankind is quite another matter, and wishing will not make it so.

That is, however, what these new interpreters seek to do. Paul Santmire, for example, who calls himself a revisionist, proudly embraces these texts for his project. “Paul’s was a universalizing gospel,” he writes of Romans 8; “it extended to Gentiles as well as to the Jews, to slaves as well as free persons, to women as well as men, to the creatures of nature as well as human creatures.” Not that this last extension has received much attention in Christian thought, but now we are experiencing a “paradigm shift” (a favorite term of the retrofitters). “Ours is the day, it now appears, when the last extension of the Pauline vision of universal salvation . . . the inclusion of all the creatures of nature—is coming to the fore throughout the church.”<sup>5</sup>

Santmire places me in an opposing school, among those whom he calls apologists. That may not sound terribly complementary at first glance, but he means it, I gather, in the ancient and honored sense, like the early fathers who were “apologists” for traditional Christianity. He doesn’t exactly award me the title of *defensor fidei*, but in this case I’ll claim it. He and I have been bouncing this subject back and forth for thirty years or so, and we can both justly claim some credit as pioneers in religious environmental ethics. We are agreed in rejecting those whom he styles “reconstructionists,” those who blame Christianity for the alleged environmental crisis and turn instead to

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

some form of eastern or counter-cultural mysticism, either dropping the label Christian or so thoroughly rewriting it that it bears little resemblance to the original—Matthew Fox, for example, or many of the ecofeminists. We also want to distance ourselves warily from those who redo theology imaginatively from scratch or from sources in science and philosophy, with light regard for the biblical sources of the faith, like James Gustafson or John Cobb. Nor will we embrace the panentheists, who believe that the being of God penetrates the whole universe, so that all of it exists in Him, though the divine being is also more than the universe. Contemporary examples include Jürgen Moltmann and, somewhat differently, Sallie McFague, with her notion of the earth as the “body of God.”<sup>6</sup>

But none of that is the subject for today. The issue for the moment is how, in what sense our Christian sources pertain to the care of the natural world.

I argue that the traditional and historically principal biblical resources for the human task with the natural world are exactly what we need for responsible environmentalism, indeed that they give a truer picture of the situation than the one the self-styled “revisionists” give us. Chief among these are the familiar words “creation,” “dominion,” and “stewardship.” There is nothing whatever wrong with paying renewed attention to (shall we call them) the “nature friendly” texts of the Bible, and preaching from them. That can be done with perfect integrity, and no doubt it is often appropriate to do that. What is wrong is to throw out the traditional concepts as no longer relevant, when they are absolutely critical and widely understood to be so. This new way of conceiving the biblical message seems, unfortunately, to require a rejection of much that is plainly in the tradition, and obviously and deservedly so.

The quarrel here is not just over picking our favorite scriptural passages. The retrofitters are actually intensely critical of concepts like dominion and stewardship, while we “apologists” are equally critical of their nature mysticism. (I hope that is not too sharp a phrase.)

They read the word “dominion” as “domination,” accusing western civilization wholesale of a rapacious, selfish treatment of nature, which is in full accord with that reading of the Genesis text. The venerable word “stewardship,” honored by most Christians from their earliest years, becomes for them a managerial, manipulative, exploitative concept: man as master, even tyrant. Santmire writes “it is best to retire [the words “dominion” and “stewardship”] for the foreseeable future” because “they still carry too much

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979. McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

baggage from the anthropocentric . . . theology of the past, . . . still too fraught with the heavy images of management, control, and exploitation of persons and resources.”<sup>7</sup>

But that is not what these texts say or imply. The critics have twisted their meaning, or claimed that they are so susceptible to wicked use that they must be jettisoned. I would simply like them to be honored for what they are. Read in their original context, they are guilty of none of the sins now ascribed to them. The command to humans to “have dominion” over the other creatures and to “subdue” the earth comes to the one being who, it has just been said, was made in the image of God. Just as the environmentalist critics of the text now claim, a clear line is drawn between humanity and the rest of creation, and we are put in a special relationship to God.

But it is a relationship, which involves reciprocity and responsibility. It is simply not one that is permitting selfish exploitation; it is not domination. Nature is not there for us to do as we please with it, for we are not ultimately responsible for its very being and ultimate destiny. God is, as the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* makes clear. We are the caretakers, the managers, yes, the stewards, the latter a fine, recurring biblical word which says plainly what our responsibilities are, and what our limits are under and for God’s purposes. Care of the earth is our charge, in such a manner as to keep it fit habitation for all generations yet to come. The Genesis text is a command to caring, responsible planned, constructive use. It is the antithesis of a license for wanton destruction.

One need not belabor the obvious: We humans, above all creatures, are given dominion so that we may be faithful stewards of God’s good creation. There is no way to “retire” these words without losing something central to biblical theology.

Were there time I could elaborate on my suspicion that other religious traditions are doing their own retrofitting. Judging by the new collections of environmental writings from the various world religions, a process similar to the one I just described for the western tradition is well under way. Many of the contributions come from westerners who have studied these traditions and picked out usefully ecological texts, or texts, which can be made to serve. But I am not sure that the larger themes of these traditions will help them very much. In Asian traditions, and in mystical pantheism generally, the world emanates from God, or is spun forth from God as a dream, or is born from God’s body. In any case, as long as the entire cosmos is ultimately

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

destined to be reabsorbed into God, it must necessarily lack inherent value. These traditions are often a-cosmic or anti-cosmic at base.

Furthermore, if one can judge by the facts on the ground, these traditions have not kept their peoples from environmental degradation, and indeed their record may be worse than that of Christian peoples. China, India, and the Middle East and North African lands seem to be prime examples of bad management over centuries, and one would not count Southeast Asia and Japan as much better. So their ecological retrofitters have their work cut out for them.

What all "revisionists" (to give them their own word) have in common is an attempt to weld new ecological science to traditional theology, if possible by responsible reinterpretation ("recovering neglected portions of the tradition" is a favorite device), but if necessary by brute retrofitting.

## II.

That brings me to my second lodestar, the natural sciences. I come almost as inevitably to this as to the first. My father and grandfather taught physics at MIT, and I have been raised in that faith as surely as in the church—not that I ever perceived much of a troubling contradiction between them, for both of these men were churchmen. But the questing mentality of the sciences, the desire to know what they can tell us and where they must remain silent, was part of my youth. I grew up with books like *Physics and Philosophy* and *Man the Unknown*. I loved a professional journal to which my father subscribed, fat and glossy and full of pictures and diagrams of machines. It was called simply *Power*—and it was not about the Holy Spirit.

While I take it as axiomatic that we are part of a mystery we can never, by our natures, understand, it belongs nevertheless to science to push back the boundaries of what we can know. Certainly scientists speculate on the big mysteries, and interestingly, too; but speculation is the dessert, so to speak, which one is permitted after tackling the main course, which is to know the natural world as thoroughly as one can.

It has always seemed to me that the more one knows about the natural world, the less one can ascribe either wisdom or morality to its workings. I cannot find that nature is an actor with will or purpose. Nature does not "know best," as some ecologists are wont to say. It is neither wise nor foolish, and to call it so is an anthropomorphism. Neither is it moral or immoral, but rather amoral. It does not have ethical quality or capacity. If it has a moral structure, it is certainly not one that we would want to embrace, full as it is

with cruelty and sudden death. No, wisdom and morality dwell at a higher level than what we can discern with the tools of science.

Theologically we are bound to ask what our ultimate destiny is, of course, and if we are really bold speculators, ask what the religious destiny of our planet is. I tend to give minimalist answers to those questions, arguing that we had better not claim to know too much of God's purposes with us. We are permitted to know, by faith, that God cares for us, wills our redemption, cares also for his entire creation, and in some fashion holds its destiny. But the details are entirely beyond our ken. Because of my fealty to the natural sciences, I accept the scientific judgment that when the sun burns out, maybe four billion years from now, the world will end in fire and ice. It is quite pointless to wonder seriously what will have become of the human race by then; only wild and fanciful guesses are allowed.

What we can read in nature about our origin and destiny is really quite limited. I am aware of the "intelligent design" argument, which holds some promise, at least as a permissible reading of ambiguous data, and which I find incipiently in Kuyper's essay on Calvinism and science. Of course it appears much earlier in many forms, like Kepler's reported exclamation on discovering one of his laws of motion in planetary physics, "Oh God, I think thy thoughts after thee!" It occurs most influentially in deism, which, though Kuyper formally rejects it, is also suggestively present in his essay, in his celebration of divine foreknown providence as the foundation of the scientific mentality. I intuit here the Newtonian universe, with God as the grand designer. Newton himself was not a deist, I should add, but his physics became a prop of that school. His portrait hung on the wall of my grandparents' house; and when I was a child, after my grandfather's death, my grandmother planted me in front of this portrait and said, "Your grandfather used to say, if ever a man's face breathed intelligence, that one does." I have the portrait now on my office wall—I have the portrait, but that does not make me a deist.

My difficulty here is a reluctance to read the will of God too closely in the natural world. It does follow from the doctrine of creation that nature and grace are not wholly antithetical, as of course the natural law tradition affirms. Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, as the Thomistic adage has it. Is nature, then, a sacrament of the invisible God? Or is it fallen, broken, awaiting its redemption, a testimony to the gulf between Creator and creation—even without the contribution of human sin, as Calvin and Barth said?

Before I hazard my own answer, let me note first that of the self-styled "revisionist" school. Their project aims at a minimum to restore nature's

standing before God to a value independent of any divine concern for human beings. We are but one part of nature, and the whole has a story with God, not just our human part.<sup>8</sup> Some would make nature a value unto itself, and claim that it has that *in se* status even apart from any relation to a Creator. It is at least plausible, they say, that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is faulty, wrong, because it produces a "monarchical model" of God as a king over nature, which needs to be jettisoned in favor of a model that will give nature independent status.<sup>9</sup> Then, given that elevated standing, the natural world is capable of eliciting our reverence. That is not too strong a word. It is an independent entity to which we can relate as an "other," if not in Buber's "I-thou" manner, then at least as a separate being which can draw out of us surprise, awe, and wonder. It will no longer be the neutral substratum of our human lives, which requires our managerial stewardship. St. Francis, not St. Benedict, has the right word.

I am afraid that none of this strikes me as terribly realistic about the earth and the human place in it. We are distinctly different from the rest of nature, obviously so, and that means we have special powers and responsibilities. Of course we are interdependent with the natural world—no one denies that, but that does not change our fundamentally distinct place. It is also a piece of perfect realism to acknowledge that there are forces in the natural world which are not friendly to us, and which it is our task to combat and restrain, so far as possible. I think of disease, drought and famine, and calamitous events like volcanoes and tornadoes and meteor impacts. Even death, inevitable though it is and testimony to our biological rooting though it is, may be resisted, postponed, and softened. And all of this we shall do with science as our principal ally.

So I cast my lot with the Calvinists, and find nature broken. I am not sure that there is not even a certain randomness in nature's behavior, and that if it possessed in any sense original perfection, as divine creation argues, it does not now deserve to be called perfect. At the very least we can say that the doctrine of creation means that nature is *not* sacred and may be approached as object for study, not subject. In any case there seems to me plenty of evidence to justify the judgment that it is fallen (although not as we are, for it can hardly sin) and should not receive our unstinted praise as a repository of wisdom and goodness. It is not the standard of the normative. Think of past ice ages, or the primeval fireball.

<sup>8</sup> Santmire, pp. 62-72.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Keller, "The Lost Fragrance: Protestantism and the Nature of What Matters," in Coward and Maguire, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

If nature is a stand-alone entity, antecedent to the spirit of God moving on the eternal waters, then its imperfections are comprehensible. The primal matter comes before God, independent, perhaps able to retain something of its original status with its disagreeable elements. Matters are not so easy if there is *nothing* before the word of God, for almost immediately we stumble upon the classic problem of theodicy. If we ascribe all that exists to the act of God who "saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good," then the natural world has more value than it could have as a stand-alone entity, but its harmful elements are harder to explain. Nevertheless we can and do try, as the history of theology shows. And at least this way we have the possibility of understanding and contextualizing natural evil, rather than having to face it as a brute, meaningless, threatening datum.

Along with most Christians who have ever lived, I imagine, I find this situation difficult and puzzling, and I am not here arguing a finished position. In the end I place the imperfections and trials of this world, this earth, within the context of Christian hope. I do not romanticize nature. I do not hold it in mystic awe. I regard it with the realistic eye of science in order to understand it, and proceed with the intent of Christian stewardship in managing it. I accept as a tenet of faith that God will somehow bring all to resolution. But there is simply no way we can put any detail on that conviction. Indeed, given the scientific account of the end of the earth and sun, it can only be held as a "hope against hope." I do not believe that the idea of cosmic redemption can tell us much about the fate of our particular planet. Still, the mystery of the cosmos is greater than our earth, and greater than any human knowledge can ever encompass. We stand in ignorance, but we also stand in faith that God's purposes do not fail. In the meantime we know our task: We are to manage the world as a habitat fit for humanity, now and as far into the future as we can see.