

Judeo-Christian Tradition Best Basis for Environmentalism



Interview: Robert H. Nelson

Robert H. Nelson, Ph.D., is a professor at the School of Public Affairs of the University of Maryland and a senior fellow of the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Dr. Nelson is the author of *Public Lands and Private Rights: The Failure of Scientific Management* (Rowman & Littlefield) and *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* (Rowman & Littlefield).

R&L: *Although, on its face, the environmental movement seems to be about economics and politics, you have argued that, at root, it is a spiritual movement. Describe the theology at the foundation of environmentalism.*

Nelson: The environmental movement, at its heart, is a nervous reaction to humankind's new relationship to the natural world that has developed over the past three hundred years. Modern science and economics have given human beings the capacity to control nature in ways almost unimaginable until recently—to build giant dams to control raging rivers, to go to the moon, to conquer disease, and so forth. At first, this newfound power over nature was seen favorably by many. The modern age has seen a host of secular “religions of

progress” based on the idea that modern developments would bring about heaven on earth. However, a number of events of the twentieth century—the atom bomb, for example—have called into question the core assumptions of these progressive religions.

According to environmentalism, modern science and economics tempt human beings with the power to “play God.” As the Bible teaches, those who strive to be like God can expect divine retribution—floods, disease, famine, and other natural disasters. Thus, the current environmental movement predicts environmental catastrophes to replicate the old biblical prophesies. Environmentalism is a secular religion, and one that sees modern science and economics leading not to heaven on earth but, perhaps, to hell on earth, the punishment

for human beings trying to assume God-like powers.

R&L: *This environmental theology, as you describe it, has much in common with the Judeo-Christian tradition but with essential differences.*

Nelson: Ironically, there is no place for God in much of environmental theology. The public teachings of leading environmental proponents essentially have nothing to say about God. Environmentalism, not Christianity or Judaism, is their real religion. And taking God out of the picture radically changes the character of their religion, despite the similarities to Judeo-Christian beliefs in other respects. Calvinism preached that human beings are fundamentally corrupt and depraved—the result of Original Sin since the Fall—but it did offer the possibility of salvation in the hereafter. Moreover, events here on earth were given meaning as part of God's grand plan for the world. If you remove these two elements, as happens in a strictly secular environmental religion, you are left with a kind of nihilism.

R&L: *What are some of the ways these*

INSIDE THIS ISSUE • Interview: Robert H. Nelson © **Articles:** “Takings and the Judeo-Christian Land Ethic: A Response” by Peter J. Hill, and “Suburban Sprawl and Human Ecology” by Jo Kwong © **Review Essay:** “Remember the Scriptures” by E. Calvin Beisner © **Book Review:** Rev. John-Peter Pham on *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* © **Column:** “Prosperity and Environmental Spirituality” by Rev. Robert A. Sirico © **Plus Book News.**

differences play themselves out, for example, in each perspective's view of the human person?

Nelson: If, as prominent environmentalists like David Brower and Dave Foreman have often said, human beings are the “cancer of the earth,” what is the point of living? It would seem that more lives lived only compound the amount of evil in the world. If, God having been removed from the equation, there is

cern for the proper care of creation?

Nelson: Secular environmentalism has to be given credit for stimulating public attention to genuine environmental problems. Our environmental policies and programs are poorly designed, cumbersome, inefficient, intrusive of personal liberty, and otherwise flawed, but they are gradually working to improve the condition of the American environment. We are such a rich and blessed country

constructive role for human beings on earth. It is hard to formulate environmental programs and policies when there can be no clear understanding of the goals—human ones, at least—that are to be served.

R&L: *How do you understand the Judeo-Christian concept of stewardship as it relates to environmental concerns?*

Nelson: Because human beings are made in the image of God, they are capable of self-awareness and of ethical knowledge. Unlike any other creature, it is possible to appeal in rational terms to human beings to make sacrifices for the benefit of other creatures. Thus, human beings have a higher responsibility for the care of the creation. By contrast, as long as environmentalism remains a secular religion, supposedly grounded in the scientific truths of biology, there will be no basis for appealing to human conscience to transcend baser instincts and to take heroic actions to protect the environment.

R&L: *Would you say, then, that the Judeo-Christian tradition is a superior basis for environmental ethics?*

Nelson: It takes a Judeo-Christian concept of stewardship, based on the idea that humans are special creatures put on

It takes a Judeo-Christian concept of stewardship, based on the idea that humans are special creatures put on earth in the image of God, to have a coherent environmentalism.

nothing even potentially redemptive to be found in the human presence on earth, this presence itself becomes morally neutral or even morally objectionable. If human beings truly are a cancer of the earth, perhaps it logically follows that they should share the same fate sought for other forms of cancer. The salvation of the world may consist of eliminating the human presence from the earth. This is secular environmentalist theology's dead end.

R&L: *Do these aberrations of secular environmentalism nullify genuine con-*

cern for the proper care of creation? that we can afford to make a lot of bad mistakes and still succeed.

R&L: *But these theological presuppositions do confuse the debate.*

Nelson: That is one of the reasons environmental policies have been so poorly designed; they reflect the basic theological confusions at the heart of environmental thinking. Confused ideas lead to confused policies. One of these confusions, as I have already mentioned, is the inability of environmentalism—at least in its secular forms—to identify a

RELIGION & LIBERTY

A Publication of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty

Volume 9 • Number 2

Publisher: Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Editor: Gregory Dunn

Contributing Editors:

William B. Allen, Ph.D.

John Attarian, Ph.D.

Doug Bandow, J.D.

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Ph.D.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin

Ronald Nash, Ph.D.

Rev. James V. Schall, S.J.

Herbert Schlossberg, Ph.D.

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty was founded in 1990 to promote a free society characterized by individual liberty and sustained by religious principles. The Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, charitable, educational, and literary center. It is supported by donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals and maintains a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

Letters and subscription requests should be directed to: Acton Institute, 161 Ottawa St., NW, Suite 301, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 or phone (616) 454-3080.

The views of the authors expressed in *Religion & Liberty* are not necessarily those of the Acton Institute.

© 1999 Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty.

earth in the image of God and with special consequent responsibilities to protect and appreciate nature, to have a coherent environmentalism.

R&L: To your way of thinking, what kinds of economic, political, and cultural institutions best allow people to fulfill their stewardship obligations?

Nelson: That is a complex question. I teach a course in environmental policy at the public policy school here at the University of Maryland that takes a whole semester on this subject and represents only an introduction. I can say that I believe that there has been a basic mistake in American environmental policy in centralizing too much responsibility and authority at the federal level. The United States is too diverse and environmental problems too site-specific to prescribe common solutions from Washington.

I also believe that the environmental movement made a great mistake in its early years by regarding the market as the enemy of the environment. Government is often the source of some of the greatest environmental abuses. For instance, many of the large dams built by the Interior Department in the western United States in the twentieth century would never have been constructed if they had to pass a market test.

R&L: What, then, is an example of the ways market structures foster sound stewardship?

Nelson: Many environmental problems are “problems of the commons.” By establishing a system of property rights, the destructive environmental incentives of such situations can be ended and positive market incentives substituted in their place. For example, unrestricted use of the air as a disposal site for industry emissions of pollutants was a “problem of the commons” situation until the

1970s. To my way of thinking, the best way to solve this problem is to create property rights to use the air for a limited and environmentally acceptable total amount of emissions. Congress finally took this step with the Clean Air Act Amendment of 1990 and its provision for an acid rain trading program. Although it is not a perfect market, this trading program seems to be working well, attaining environmental goals more rapidly and at lower costs than had been expected.

R&L: This “problem of the commons” is reflected in water-use issues as well, isn’t it?

Nelson: That’s right. And a market solution to it is being provided by the Oregon Water Trust. The members of this organization enter the water market to buy rights from farmers and other users. They then “use” those rights by leaving the water unused in rivers and streams, increasing in-stream water flows, reducing pollution concentrations, and improving fishing, rafting, and other recreational activities. Because all

Nelson: I can give one good example based on my work as a career economic analyst in the United States Department of the Interior from 1975 to 1993. The Interior Department (actually the Bureau of Land Management within the Department) administers livestock grazing on federal lands that cover about 10 percent of the land area of the United States. Historically, ranchers have had livestock grazing permits that have been associated with the same ranch properties for many years. Under traditional government policy, these permits had to be used for livestock grazing.

Environmental groups recently have been offering to buy grazing permits in particularly sensitive areas with an eye toward modifying or eliminating livestock grazing there. As things stand now, they have no clear legal right to buy the permits, even if ranchers are willing sellers. If an environmental group bought a grazing permit from a rancher and tried to end livestock grazing—say, in a wilderness area where grazing is still occurring—the government would have a legal obligation to reissue the grazing permit to another livestock operator.

Many environmental problems are “problems of the commons.” By establishing a system of property rights, the destructive environmental incentives of such situations can be ended.

of this is based on voluntary transactions in a market, it is much less socially divisive and intrusive of personal liberty than the traditional command and control regulatory approach. These sorts of approaches are starting to have a great impact on the way we think about the environment.

R&L: Conversely, what is an example of the way government policy stymies good stewardship?

R&L: It sounds like the incentives do not exist for the government to create environmentally sound public policy.

Nelson: The government often poses such obstacles to the development and use of markets in environmental areas. The United States Congress recently prohibited for a period the adoption of systems of fishing rights that have the potential to help curb the gross overcapacity and over-utilization that is

currently occurring in our fishing areas. Although this prohibition was temporary, it reflected the historic aversion of politicians to giving up control. Sadly, there are many politicians who survive by manipulating government programs to curry favor among their constituents.

R&L: *Some people are uncomfortable with free-market approaches to environmentalism because they fear that such approaches will encourage economic values to the exclusion of non-economic values. How do you respond to this concern?*

Nelson: This is another one of those large and complex questions. Just to give one response, I might note first that the alternative to the market is likely to be politics. Many politicians find it hard to look beyond the next election. By contrast, the market promotes, one might say, a greater “sustainability” because it has a much longer time horizon. A market participant typically wants to preserve and protect his property because he wants to be able to capture the benefits for a long time to come.

whole new state of affairs on earth—the arrival, in effect, of the millennium.

R&L: *This sort of economic idolatry would seem to seriously devalue the nature of man and the importance of the natural world.*

Nelson: People who believe in the religions of economic progress have a tendency to devalue the importance of the environment in their haste to reach their new heaven on earth. This was more of a problem in the past when socialist and progressive religions dominated the intellectual elite, but it has hardly disappeared as a powerful idea.

R&L: *In what ways does concern for the world’s poor get lost or confused in the contemporary environmental debate? Can environmentalism and compassion toward the poor be reconciled?*

Nelson: Historically, helping the poor has been a defining feature in the ideals of the American Left in politics—even when sometimes the methods adopted have been ill-suited to actual achieve-

derlying assumptions of public policy. And it is one of the main reasons why a return to traditional Judeo-Christian ways of understanding the relationship of man and nature—understandings that make the fate of poor people much more central—is necessary.

R&L: *Can you paint for us your vision of what the best environment for man looks like?*

Nelson: It should be a place where, first of all people, are well-provided with the basics of food, shelter, clothing, and other consumptive needs. However, economic growth should not become an end in itself, a secular religion. Protecting the physical environment in all its beauty and diversity should be a fundamental objective. However, this protection should not be placed in opposition to human well-being. Life will not be fulfilling unless set in the framework of some powerful system of meaning. That means religion. It will probably not be the same religion for every person, but the best hope for the environment in the twenty-first century lies in a religious revival around the world that recognizes the human obligation to environmental protection and enjoyment.

R&L: *In closing, can you share some advice on how to advance the environmental debate in helpful ways?*

Nelson: There are many sound technical ideas for improving current environmental policy, but such ideas will be adopted only when they are combined with a strong commitment to sound environmental goals. This has not always been the case; advocates of superior policy ideas sometimes have mixed them with an apparent disdain for the values of environmental improvement. In forming good public policy, techniques and values will have to be always inextricably intermixed. A

Protecting the physical environment in all its beauty and diversity should be a fundamental objective. However, this protection should not be placed in opposition to human well-being.

But there is one way in which I do agree with this concern about economic values in relation to the environment. Economic growth can become a secular religion. European socialism and American progressivism in the early part of this century are good examples of this. The advance of material progress, as these secular religions preached, would serve to solve not only the material but also the spiritual problems of the human condition, thereby bringing about a

ment of the objective. Contemporary environmentalism, however, has a much more ambiguous attitude here.

It is a dirty little secret that, surprisingly, many environmentalists think that there are too many people on the earth and that a die-off of poor people may be the only realistic hope of getting rid of any large number of them. This is an example where environmental theology—while seldom fully explicit—is having a surprisingly large impact on the un-

Takings and the Judeo-Christian Land Ethic: A Response

Peter J. Hill

A Christian living in the late-twentieth century United States faces several tensions, not the least of which is how to be salt and light in an increasingly secular environment. In such a world, both institutions and culture may differ dramatically from God's principles for organizing our lives and relating to our fellow human beings. Given this tension, it is instructive for Christians to reflect upon particular policy issues and bring scriptural insights to bear on them.

It is for this reason that a recent publication by the Evangelical Environmental Network, *"This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is God's Land": Takings Legislation Versus the Judeo-Christian Land Ethic*, is a welcome endeavor. The pamphlet is a response to recent efforts by certain property rights advocates to strengthen the takings clause of the United States Constitution. Unfortunately, this effort is fundamentally flawed because of the authors' poor understanding of the role and function of property rights.

Biblical Principles and Takings Legislation

The takings clause states: "nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation." It traditionally has been interpreted to mean that when property is physically appropriated for government purposes such as roads, airports, or other public facilities, the landowner must be financially compensated. The issue today is whether government regulations that reduce one's use of one's property also require compensation.

The twentieth century has seen a vast expansion of the role of the federal government in our lives, reflected in many more regulations on land use. In particular, the Endangered Species Act and the wetlands provisions of the Clean Water Act can place substantial limitations upon private property rights. Yet, for the most part, the government has not been required to compensate landowners, even though these regulations may be quite costly.

In response to these costs, a number of groups (often lumped together as "property rights groups") have introduced legislation in Congress to extend the just compensation provision to include these "regulatory takings." Such legislation would require the government to compensate a landowner if regulations such as those protecting endangered species or setting aside wetlands reduced the value of the property below some threshold such as 30 percent. This legislation has been controversial, to say the least, and *"This Land Is Your Land"* is an effort to bring biblical principles to bear upon the takings legislation.

Although the pamphlet concentrates specifically on the takings legislation, its basic theme deals with property rights in general. "Overall, we believe that the spirit, attitudes, and assumptions that underlie the property rights movement are at odds with the scriptural ethic governing our relationship with the land and our neighbors who dwell in it," the authors write. They find three basic themes in Scripture that "stand in opposition to the perspective on land ownership advocated by the property rights move-

ment." Those themes are: One, the value of land is not to reflect merely its monetary value but also "the love, grace, and majesty of its Creator." Two, God is the ultimate owner of the earth; hence, human "owners" of land are really steward-tenants who are responsible to God for how they use His creation. And three, "We must in all things—including land ownership—love our neighbors and ... be willing to make sacrifices ... for their well-being." I will take up each of these arguments in turn.

The Value of Land

One can only say a hearty "amen" to the argument that the value of land does not lie merely in its monetary value. Thinking of land only in terms of its ability to produce wealth is idolatrous and reflects the more general materialism so prevalent in our society. Nevertheless, to assert that defenders of private property rights believe that all land should be used to maximize profits and that defending property rights means one is focusing just on monetary values is simply wrong. People who own land value it for a host of reasons, and private property rights no more make those reasons sinful than allowing people to observe the Sabbath in their own way means that they will dishonor it.

Implicit in the analysis of *"This Land Is Your Land"* is the assumption that whatever takes place in the private sector reflects human greed and fallibility but that actions in the government sector are in the public interest and not marred by sin. Thus, throughout this pamphlet, the line of reasoning runs as follows: (1) God calls us to numerous

obligations with regard to our fellow citizens. (2) When we own property, it is likely that our sin nature will corrupt our perspective and we will violate God's commands. (3) If, instead, we push the decisions to the public sector, our sin nature will no longer be a problem, and the decisions will accurately reflect biblical principles.

Is it not far more scriptural to assume that human sinfulness is pervasive and can affect all human endeavors and humanly designed institutions? If one accepts that fact, as Christians must, then one has to deal honestly with the question of what rules should govern land use. In other words, how can humans construct the rules so that human cooperation is promoted and biblical commands for resource use are obeyed? Sadly, the authors avoid this issue.

The Ownership Issue

There are three basic mechanisms for governing land use. First, land can be owned by individuals or groups of indi-

Of course, there are numerous intermediate positions between each of these, and the authors are not arguing for complete collective control. They are asserting, however, that moving toward more collective control and away from private property rights will better reflect the principle that God is the ultimate owner of everything.

But private property rules are essentially governance mechanisms that allow people to act independently so long as they do not violate the property rights of others. The actions of property owners reflect a variety of purposes and worldviews, some of which may be sinful and some quite in accord with God's purposes. Houses of worship are built on private property, families flourish under a private property regime, and voluntary institutions can assist the poor through the use of private property.

Private property does give owners the freedom to violate certain scriptural principles (as do all other governance mechanisms), but that freedom is lim-

achieve the goals determined by the government. While this use of coercion has the potential to keep people from using property in an incorrect or sinful manner, it also creates great opportunities for expanding the influence of sin. Thus, one has to ask whether the potential for good outweighs the potential for harm.

To favor private property rights is not to advocate that property should be used only for selfish ends but, rather, that a system based on voluntary cooperation is more likely to satisfy standards of justice than one that relies more on coercion. When government can appropriate property at will, there is much more opportunity for our flawed human nature to reign than under a private property regime, as the evidence of human history testifies.

Love of Neighbor

The pamphlet strongly emphasizes our obligation to love our neighbors, which is clearly a biblical command. When one translates this to the issue at hand, it takes the form of questioning whether a private property regime adequately acknowledges the common good, especially with respect to the use of land. In other words, does a private property regime fail to provide some things that are essential to the common good?

Two responses are in order. First, as discussed above, a private property regime provides substantial scope for people to express their love of neighbors through their individual choices. The alternative is coerced decision making, which is fraught with danger. As our world becomes more and more secular, it becomes less and less likely that decisions made by the majority concerning the common good will reflect Christian principles.

But a second response is also necessary. Yes, in some cases private property and markets do not provide all a well-ordered society requires. It is in this



Protecting property through takings legislation does not negate love of neighbor but, rather, reflects a basic principle of justice.

— Peter J. Hill

viduals. In such a system, the role of government is limited to enforcing contracts and protecting those individuals from physical invasion by others. The second mechanism is to have no rules governing access to property, where any and all can use the land. As many scholars have shown, this results in what is called "the tragedy of the commons" and has never been a stable or workable arrangement. The third is to have collective control or government ownership.

ited. Specifically, under a property rights regime one cannot do things that involve the property of others without securing their permission. Sometimes this permission is secured by offering monetary payments, but it is also secured by moral appeal, by asking people to cooperate in achieving some objective.

In contrast, government ownership uses a much heavier dose of coercion. It uses the threat of punishment against people who fail to use their property to

context that the original takings clause of the Constitution was established. Even if a particular landowner did not think that a road was an accurate reflection of the common good, that landowner could not withhold his land if it was essential for a public improvement.

The Founders, however, placed a limitation upon the government's ability to take property. It could do so only if it paid just compensation, which has been interpreted to mean the market value of the land in question. The recent takings legislation is simply an extension of that concept.

When the Founders wrote the original takings clause, they had no concept of a large-scale federal government that would be engaged in massive social engineering, thus their concept of takings was simply physical appropriation. Now, the federal government has moved to regulate land use in other ways to provide for the public good, such as habitat preservation for endangered species. Applying the takings concept to the modern setting simply says that if society as a whole wants certain species preserved, the general public, through the government, should be willing to pay for that preservation; in the same way, if people want public roads, they must pay the landowners on whose land the roads are built.

This is, however, the fundamental point of contention for the authors. They argue that asking the general public to pay for these goods, as property rights legislation would require, violates the command to love our neighbors. It "would effectively write into law a disregard for Christ's great Commandment."

They are wrong. Consider a parallel situation. Police protection is essential for law and order in our communities. Therefore, following their reasoning, home owners should have an obligation to provide free housing for all police

officers, just as landowners must provide free habitat for endangered species.

To argue that something is for the common good does not mean that provision of that common good should fall only upon a limited number of people. There is no more justice inherent in allowing people to commandeer land for species without paying for it than there is in allowing police officers to commandeer living space without paying for it.

Another complication is that if one

tion makes clear that regulations designed to control pollution would not be classified as a taking. The takings legislation is, instead, aimed at forcing society as a whole to pay for property uses that generate benefits for society as a whole. If the preservation of wetlands or the maintenance of species habitat represents a socially desirable goal, then the proposed legislation would require society to pay for it.

Thinking of land only in terms of its ability to produce wealth is idolatrous and reflects the more general materialism so prevalent in our society.

does not have to pay for something, one finds that one "needs" a large amount of that item. How much housing would police officers require if they could force individual home owners to provide the space they needed? Probably a large amount. Similarly, when the general public can force a small group—namely, landowners who have a particular species on their property—to bear the cost of species protection, there is a tendency for the government, representing the public, to demand a large amount of land and to ignore other, less costly ways that might protect endangered species.

A Serious Misunderstanding

Finally, a factual error in the analysis in "*This Land Is Your Land*" must be corrected. The authors assert that takings legislation would compensate landowners not just for beneficial social acts such as protecting endangered species but also for regulations against pollution. In other words, the authors imply that the laws would negate all regulation. This reading is a misunderstanding of the legislation. Most, if not all, of the legislative proposals that have been put before Congress have contained an explicit "nuisance exception." This excep-

Limiting the Use of Coercive Power Limits the Power of Sin

All in all, if one wishes to find a useful application of biblical reasoning to an important policy issue, one should not turn to "*This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is God's Land*." The authors misunderstand private property rights and therefore distort the purpose and the effects of takings legislation.

Private property rights are a governance mechanism based on the premise that limiting the use of coercive power limits the power of sin. Likewise, protecting property through takings legislation does not negate love of neighbor but, rather, reflects a basic principle of justice; it is wrong to force one group in society to pay for that which others want. The authors are so intent on making private property look bad that they miss this fundamental truth. **A**

Peter J. Hill, Ph.D., is professor of economics at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, and a senior associate of the Political Economy Research Center (PERC) in Bozeman, Montana. He is, with Joseph Bast and Richard Rue, co-author of Eco-Sanity: A Common Sense Guide to the Environment (Madison Books).

Suburban Sprawl and Human Ecology

Jo Kwong

The modern environmental movement originated during the 1970s in response to serious environmental conditions—polluted rivers, blighted landscapes, and noxious air. We owe great tribute to those who worked tirelessly to remind us of our obligation to be good stewards of the earth. In a relatively short time, we responded to the environmental calls to action, and the results are noteworthy. Our land, air, and water have improved markedly during the past two decades, yet one cannot help but notice that as each environmental challenge becomes increasingly manageable, new crises seem to arise in turn. The newest environmental threat, according to the latest environmental wisdom, is suburban sprawl.

To some, sprawl is simply an American phenomenon. Since America is blessed with plenty of land, it seems only natural that some folks choose to live in central cities, some on the cities' edge, and some in the rural hinterlands. To others, however, the migration to suburbs represents everything wrong with our nation. Large-scale road building and other landforms designed around the automobile are said to be responsible for the American abandonment of the city. With this abandonment comes all manner of environmental degradation: air pollution from daily commutes, conversion of farmland to suburban uses, altered wildlife habitat, depletion of fossil fuel resources, and a host of associated environmental concerns.

Is suburban sprawl bad for the environment? Furthermore, how do these issues square with concerns raised by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical let-

ter *Centesimus Annus*—that “too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’*”? In his words, “In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the *human environment*, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves.” In fact, sprawl has become the new platform for environmental activists to pursue alternative social agendas. Proposed growth-control policies ultimately lead to restrained individual choice regarding where we live, work, and play. These policies directly undermine the right of self-determination to make the most basic of choices, cutting right to the core of human ecology.

The Current Debate on Sprawl

The Sierra Club, a leading environmental advocacy group, defines sprawl as “low-density development beyond the edge of service and employment, which separates where people live from where they shop, work, recreate, and educate—thus requiring cars to move between zones.” The Sierra Club’s publication, *The Dark Side of the American Dream*, details its perceptions of the costs and consequences of sprawl.

It cites “unplanned, rapid growth and poor land-use management” as responsible for “increased traffic congestion, longer commutes, increased dependence on fossil fuels, crowded schools, worsening air and water pollution, lost open space and wetlands, increased flooding, destroyed wildlife habitat, higher taxes, and dying city centers.” These problems, in turn, are “threatening the quality of

life and eroding the national progress we’ve made protecting our environment under legislation such as the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act.”

Consequently, the Sierra Club’s “Challenge to Sprawl” campaign is dedicated to slowing development and encouraging “smart growth,” which channels development to areas with existing infrastructure and consumes less land for roads, houses, and commercial buildings.

Urban sprawl is not a new concern. Urban planners have long tackled the question of how to efficiently design cities, developments, and neighborhoods. Some planned developments—such as Radburn, New Jersey; Reston, Virginia; and Columbia, Maryland—are notable because they remain in existence today. More common are the abandoned high rises (like those located south of the Loop along the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago) that stand in testimony to failed attempts at urban renewal. Perhaps most noteworthy of all is the famed Pruitt Igoe high-rise housing project in St. Louis. Designed and built in the 1960s to address all kinds of human ills, the Pruitt Igoe won architectural accolades and awards, only to be demolished in 1972, a miserable experiment in which the human inhabitants failed to behave as engineered.

The new momentum behind urban sprawl and suburbanization, however, is different. It goes beyond the traditional urban concerns of crime, unemployment, and the like. This time, the focus is on environmental destruction. The Sierra Club propels the threat of sprawl

into the American consciousness by claiming “many Americans consider overdevelopment—‘sprawl’—to be the fastest-growing threat to their local environment and quality of life.”

Additionally, environmental activists cite the more traditional consequences of sprawl: higher taxes for infrastructure and services; erosion of the inner-city tax base; destruction of downtown commercial centers; dwindling investment opportunities; concentration of poverty in urban centers; and the “robbing” of city character as “abandoned factories, boarded-up homes, and decaying retail centers dominate the landscape.” While each of these economic problems is an important issue, this article is limited to a consideration of the environmental concerns associated with sprawl.

Can the aforementioned list of environmental consequences be fairly attributed to sprawl and urbanization? Surely this calls for an examination of a complex, interwoven set of interactions. Perhaps the best that can be offered here are some odd facts and contrary perspectives to consider as fuel for the fire.

Contrary Perspectives

Farmland Conversion. People fear we are losing a cherished way of life—the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian nation. Consequently, many land preservation policies have been proposed and adopted during the past two decades.

Yet a way of life is a difficult thing to legislate through public policy. As our opportunities and abilities evolve, our lifestyles change. Thanks to ever-evolving new technologies, we produce more food on less land than ever before, leaving fewer people to endure the relatively difficult agrarian lifestyle. Despite the tendency to romanticize agrarian living, farm life is grueling.

Fortunately, some people love to live and work on the land, and those hardy farmers and ranchers provide valuable goods for the rest of us. Without a doubt,

they should be free to do so. The reverse, however, is cause for concern. City dwellers who pursue farmland policies that make it difficult for farmers to sell their land—all in the quest of farmland preservation—are relegating their fellow man to a life-style he prefers to leave behind.

Finally, there are the actual agricultural land acreage statistics. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, cropland has remained unchanged—24 percent of United States land area—during the past fifty years. In contrast, urban land uses comprise about 3 percent of total land area. Combined urban and suburban land uses account for less than 5 percent of total land area in the continental United States.

Air Pollution. Despite the increase in suburbanization, air quality in the United States has shown a trend of improvement during the last two decades. Since 1980, overall air quality has improved by more than 40 percent. Ambient levels of the six air pollutants targeted by federal

Transportation Survey found that average work trip speeds are increasing—from 28 mph in 1983 to 32.3 mph in 1990 and 33.6 mph in 1995. Census data show that as people and jobs have moved to the suburbs, commute times have not increased. This should not be surprising, since people routinely make housing selections based on a combination of factors: distance to work and schools, neighborhood character, and so on.

Energy Consumption. Energy consumption concerns, like those of air pollution and congestion, are also somewhat suspect. Cars use more energy and pollute more in congested city traffic than they do in the more open areas of the lower-density suburbs. This consideration aside, sprawl is not likely to lead to legitimate concerns about fossil fuel depletion. Estimates of oil reserves have increased every year for the past two decades, thanks to new technologies that aid in the discovery and recovery of fossil fuels.

Forests. Suburban sprawl is said to

Growth control policies directly undermine the right of self-determination to make the most basic of choices, cutting right to the core of human ecology.

— Jo Kwong



regulations have declined since the 1970s. Proponents of growth regulations typically cite pollution from increased traffic congestion, yet ambient levels of carbon monoxide caused mostly by car emissions decreased 63.7 percent between 1975 and 1995.

Traffic Congestion. The Sierra Club cites “longer commutes that steal time from family and work” as another consequence of sprawl. Yet the last three surveys by the Nationwide Personal

be eating up our nation’s forests. Contrary to popular belief, forested areas in America are expanding, rather than contracting. According to the United States Forest Service, annual timber growth in the United States exceeds harvest by 37 percent and has exceeded harvest every year since 1952. The increase is mainly due to marginal farmlands that grew back into forests as a result of technological developments in agriculture.

Global Warming. And of course, no

issue is complete without a direct link to the mother lode of all environmental problems—global warming. The Sierra Club contends that “sprawl is also contributing to one of the biggest international environmental problems today—global warming. Cars zipping around highways, or, worse, cars stuck for hours in traffic jams, spew millions of tons of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into our atmosphere each year. Even though sprawl is considered a regional problem, its consequences are global.” The global warming debates have been highly polarized with regard to the anthropocentric contribution. It is sufficiently compelling, however, to observe that the noted rise in global temperatures occurred before 1940—prior to the rise of urban sprawl and its associated traffic flows.

How Smart Is Smart Growth?

The environmental advocacy group Friends of the Earth tells its followers to persuade politicians to act. “Every urban authority should be urged to undertake a comprehensive urban capacity assessment, and to promote more medium density residential developments near public transport nodes, with reduced car parking provision.” It argues that “perceptions of both town and country need to change; and the Government needs to take a lead in reducing the exodus [from the cities].”

Vice President Al Gore is one politician taking their lead. His “Better American Bonds” campaign, announced in January 1999, enlists a dozen federal agencies to preserve and enhance green space, parks, and urban waters. State and local governments will vie for Environmental Protection Agency approval to secure \$10 billion in bond money for public transit, air quality preservation, and coordination of transportation and planning in urban regions.

Not everyone agrees with such tactics. According to Friends of the Earth,

the Town and Country Planning Association, which is an opponent of “packing people into existing urban areas,” has suggested that environmentalists are “militant” in their smart growth targets. The *tcpa* may be on to something. A growing number of policy analysts see smart growth policies as little more than restricting Americans’ freedom of choice in housing and transportation.

In Portland, Oregon, which leads the nation in government-regulated growth, the effort to concentrate development inside an “urban growth boundary” has driven up housing prices and increased congestion, reducing air quality and lengthening commuting times. A Portland State University economist found that the city’s housing prices rose by 63.8 percent from 1990 to 1995, faster than the United States median of 18.2 percent. Land prices in Portland have more than doubled since 1990. Metro, the city’s regional planning authority, controls the boundary created in 1979 to “in-fill” vacant land in developed areas. As Metro deliberates whether to add more land to the boundary, the city’s fate hangs in the balance. Without boundary expansions, projected population growth will force residents to live in more crowded cities, smaller houses, and more congested neighborhoods.

Urban policy expert Sam Staley writes, “Suburbanization is the result of a healthy economic and social process: families earning high enough incomes to exercise choice over their quality of life and housing. The task before cities is to provide competitive options for these families, not limit them in the name of ‘urban sprawl’.”

Before launching new and broader government programs to respond to the task of cities, Gore and other politicians would be wise to focus on the consequences of existing state efforts to shape our landscapes. Government subsidies, including home mortgage loan guarantees, federal grants for municipal infra-

structure development, state and local tax incentives to lure businesses to the suburbs, and regulations that increase the cost of doing business in the inner cities, have effected the mass exodus of families, businesses, and churches from the cities. Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith writes in his book, *The Twenty-first Century City*, “Federal urban policy drives wealth out of cities. In fact, if we specifically designed a ‘suburban policy’ to drive investment out of cities, it would look a lot like the current system.”

Parting Comments

During the failed attempts of the 1960s, social engineers believed they could transform human action by simply changing the physical circumstances of man’s existence. Efforts to reach out to the soul and spirit were notably absent. It failed then, and there is no reason to believe it will not fail again. Like other coercive visions, the new environmental quest to regulate and channel human activity is a challenge to our individual freedom and a challenge to the preservation of the human environment.

Is suburban sprawl a serious threat to our existence? While the debate may seem irrelevant to many, it is an issue to keep in the fore. Environmental issues typically have far-reaching effects, and the sprawl issue is no exception. Under its wings, social engineers have increasing opportunities to have an impact on virtually every aspect of our lives—right down to the nature and character of our neighborhoods, countryside, and hinterlands. And, consequently, to the nature of the family, which, as John Paul reminds us, is the “first and fundamental structure for ‘human ecology’.” A

Jo Kwong, Ph.D., is the environmental research associate at the Atlas Economic Research Foundation and an assistant research professor at George Mason University, both in Fairfax, Virginia.

Remember the Scriptures

A Review Essay by E. Calvin Beisner

Remember Creation is another in a growing list of books by evangelicals calling for concern about the environment. The fundamental message that Christians have a responsibility to God for wise stewardship of creation is unassailable, and Scott Hoezee's book artfully makes the case for this. There are, however, serious weaknesses that detract from the book's usefulness as a source of sound understanding regarding environmental theology, ethics, and science.

A Scientifically Flawed Crisis Mentality

First, the book displays considerable bias in favor of a crisis mentality in the sources cited, a common problem of many evangelical writings on the environment. Of the seventy-eight endnotes, only eight come from sources critical of what one might call the "conventional wisdom"; seven of these are from one source and one from another. In the endnotes, twenty-six distinct sources specifically address environmental issues (whether science, ethics, policy, or other aspects); of these, twenty-four support the conventional wisdom, and only two are critical of it. This indicates a lack of familiarity with the substance of the various debates in this field, which seriously undermines the book's credibility. Hoezee's understanding of all aspects of the debate would have been greatly enhanced by his having treated, among others, such sources as Gregg Easterbrook's *A Moment on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism*; Ronald Bailey's (ed.) *The True*

State of the Planet; and Julian Simon's (ed.) *The Resourceful Earth* and *The State of Humanity*.

Second, the book's brief acknowledgment that there even *is* debate about empirical states of affairs in the environment indicates lack of awareness of the extent and character of that debate, lack of understanding of how science

*Remember Creation:
God's World of Wonder and Delight*
by Scott Hoezee

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
1998. 144 pp. Paperback: \$14.00

operates, and lack of knowledge of the current state of the debate on specific issues. This lack appears most clearly, perhaps, in his one most direct statement about scientific debate: "Unhappily, it seems almost every environmental statistic is susceptible to manipulation both by those who wish to make the crisis appear more dire and by those who wish to minimize it." Shortly he adds, "But as is often the case in such situations, *even if the truth lies somewhere in between* [emphasis added], God's creation is still in trouble in ways that have seldom before been true." There are several problems with such thinking.

One, it is part of the normal workings of science for scientists to attempt various ways of fitting data into theories. The more readily theories incorporate data, the more likely they are to be true; the more difficulty theories have

incorporating data, the less likely they are to be true. There is nothing unhappy about this procedure, unless we simply want to abandon scientific procedures.

Two, in some instances it is not a manipulation of data that must be scrutinized but the assertion of conclusions wholly lacking in data. This, for example, was the case for quite some time regarding claims of species extinction rates.

Three, splitting the difference between competing data claims or competing explanations of data is *not* how science works. Frequently it turns out that the truth is nowhere near the midpoint between competing claims—and sometimes it is beyond one or the other end of the spectrum defined by the first competing claims.

And four, in some of the most serious instances of debate over environmental science, the question is not nearly so much over what data are accurate and how to interpret them as over a much more fundamental question about the nature of scientific endeavor. The debate is over whether scientists should give greater weight to theories or models, on the one hand, or to empirical observation, on the other hand. In the cases of controversies regarding overpopulation, resource depletion, global warming, rain forest reduction, and species extinction, a great deal of the disagreement hinges on this divergence. The crisis proponents in each of these cases tend to put greater stake in theoretical models (and their computer simulations) than in empirical observations; their critics tend to do the opposite. When the debate is over

such fundamental questions, it must not simply be swept aside, and splitting the difference becomes utterly irrelevant.

Hermeneutical and Theological Problems

Finally, like most other evangelical writings on the environment, *Remember Creation* suffers from some hermeneutical and theological problems. First, Hoezee equates cultivating and tilling the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15) with subduing and ruling the earth (Gen. 1:28), despite clear textual and philological indicators that these address different actions with different objects. One example of this problem is his handling of my own book, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness*; in fact, *Remember Creation* is in many ways a direct response to it.

Space does not permit recounting Hoezee's position on this point in full; suffice it to say that he concludes his arguments regarding the meaning of *subdue* and *rule* in Genesis 1 and of *tend* and *keep* in Genesis 2 in this way:

'the Garden' of Genesis 2 can appropriately be seen as referring generally to the entire creation of God" merely begs the question. Hoezee merely *asserts* but does not actually *argue* that the Garden is not separate from the rest of the earth. He argues in a circle by assuming that the clause *the part stands for the whole* properly applies to this situation. The statement might, if it properly applied, explain things, but it does not provide evidence for the conclusion. He also ignores contrary evidence. If the author of Genesis intended to use *garden* as synecdoche for *earth*, why do Genesis 2 and 3 distinguish garden from earth in many ways, as when God planted the garden after creating the earth?

In writing, "Hence it is also legitimate and biblically correct to allow the tender images of Genesis 2 to qualify and enhance our understanding of 'rule and subdue' words we find in Genesis 2 [sic]," Hoezee again begs the question and again ignores contrary evidence of the different linguistic ranges of the

and Eve had to beat back and subdue a recalcitrant and imperfect creation lest it threaten the *shalom* of the Garden." Hoezee poisons the well by associating the view against which he argues with heresy and using the emotion-laden words *beat back* and *recalcitrant*. He also misuses the word *heresy* by applying it to an issue on which there is debate among orthodox Christian scholars and on which there has never been any authoritative judgment by any Christian denomination, let alone by the Church catholic.

And he erects and attacks a straw man by calling the creation asserted by the view he attacks "recalcitrant." I never wrote that the creation outside the garden was recalcitrant. Indeed, in discussing the effects of the Curse, I wrote, "Instead of submitting readily to Adam's dominion, [the earth outside the garden] would rebel against him. Instead of producing abundant fruits for Adam's sustenance, it would produce thorns and thistles. In other words, it would behave toward Adam as Adam had behaved toward God—a fitting punishment for Adam's sin." This assumes that apart from the Fall and the Curse, the earth outside the garden, though susceptible of being "transformed into greater glory," would have yielded readily to Adam's subduing and ruling.

In sum, *Remember Creation* is an aesthetically attractive but logically, hermeneutically, theologically, and scientifically flawed work. The question of our responsible care of God's creation is a vital one; sadly, Hoezee commits serious errors in his treatment of it. **A**

E. Calvin Beisner is associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and the author of *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry Into the Environmental Debate* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).



Remember Creation gives no serious consideration to the doctrine of God's curse on the earth.

— E. Calvin Beisner

... "the earth" of Genesis 1 and "the Garden" of Genesis 2 can appropriately be seen as referring generally to the entire creation of God. Hence it is also legitimate and biblically correct to allow the tender images of Genesis 2 to qualify and enhance our understanding of the "rule and subdue" words we find in Genesis 2.

His arguments supporting this conclusion fail for a variety of reasons. Arguing that "'the earth' of Genesis 1 and

words in question; the distinction between garden and earth mentioned in the previous point; and the fact that the garden needed guarding before the Fall, which entails some qualitative difference between what was in and what was outside the garden.

Second, Hoezee gives no serious consideration to the doctrine of God's curse on the earth. Hoezee writes that "... it borders on heresy to suggest that beyond the boundaries of Eden, Adam

Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor

by Leonardo Boff

Orbis Books, 1997. 242 pp. Paperback: \$22.00

Review by Rev. John-Peter Pham

An interesting phenomenon of recent years has been the relative ease with which many former Communist parties around the globe have successfully reinvented themselves as “social democrats,” often with strong “environmentalist” stances. What is disturbing about the political comeback of the cadres is that they are preaching essentially the same illiberal, anti-humanistic, and anti-entrepreneurial message, albeit this time under the banner of “scientific” environmental responsibility rather than Marxist historical imperative. This is disconcerting particularly when one recalls Pope John Paul II’s incisive analysis of communism in his 1991 encyclical letter, *Centesimus Annus*: that its “fundamental error” was “anthropological in nature.”

Thus it is not so surprising that some of the theological apologists for discredited Marxist radicalism would likewise attempt a comeback by promoting a newfound radical green “spirituality.” Such is the case with former Franciscan friar Leonardo Boff—once Brazil’s most influential exponent of the so-called “liberation theology” that tried to couple Christian salvation with Marxist class struggle—as witnessed in his latest book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Unfortunately, a careful reading of the teachings of Boff the eco-spiritualist unveils—under a thin veneer of junk science, paganism, and bad anthropology—the same tired political and economic agenda espoused by Boff the liberation theologian.

The first part of the book pretends to be scientific and objective. In actuality, Boff rehearses (and cites) the same “population bomb” alarmism that the Club of Rome and others propagated in the early 1970s and that, for all but the willfully ignorant, the late economist Julian Simon put to rest. And why is an increasing population so dangerous? Because it offends Gaia, the interconnected and sentient planet we inhabit. In fact, Boff informs his readers that “the Earth is not a planet on which life exists ... the Earth does not contain life. It *is* life, a living superorganism, Gaia.” Or so goes a theory that Boff, at least, finds “very plausible.”

With such “science” behind him, Boff moves to the second, theological—or, more accurately, pantheistic—part of his book. For if earth is Gaia with her “force fields” and “morphogenetic fields,” God is “that all-attracting Magnet, that Moving Force animating all, that Passion producing all.”

Having laid this foundation, Boff proceeds to “connect all our experiences and help us establish a new covenant” in the third part of *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, where he proposes what he calls an “eco-spirituality.” Actually, for something described as “new,” it does not sound much different from the old revolutionary Boff:

A revolution is successful only when it is the response to an urgent need for changes; unless those changes are made, problems will continue, cri-

ses will deepen, and people will lose hope and meaning in their lives ... a new spirituality, one adequate to the ecological revolution, is urgently needed.... The conventional spirituality of the churches and of most historic religions is tied to models of life and interpretations of the world (worldviews) that no longer suit contemporary sensitivity.

For Boff the environmentalist, as for Boff the liberationist visionary, religion’s worth is measured by its utility to the revolutionary cause. Faith “cannot enclose religious persons in dogmas and cultural representations. It must serve as an organized place where people may be initiated, accompanied, and aided” in expressing the “spirit of the age” that assures us that “despite the threats of destruction that the human species’ destructive machine has mounted and uses against Gaia, a good and kind future is assured because this cosmos and this Earth belong to the Spirit.”

What are the practical implications of all this? First, Boff calls for the teaching of a new cosmological vision that downplays any anthropocentrism. Man is not *Homo sapiens*, man the wise, but, according to Boff, *Homo demens*, man the deranged, who is relatively insignificant in the scheme of things. In fact, without explaining how his newly minted “citizens” would express themselves in the civic process, Boff proposes that in his new “ecological and social democracy, it is not just humans who are citizens but all beings.... Democracy accordingly issues in a biocracy and cosmocracy.”

Interestingly, everything that John Paul said earlier in his critique of Marxism’s fundamental anthropological error thus applies to Boff’s eco-spirituality: “Socialism considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is

completely subordinated to the socio-economic mechanism.” Sure enough, Boff’s solution to the challenge of environmental questions is to remove them altogether from individuals working at the local levels for concrete solutions to specific problems and instead to subordinate the whole process to “global bodies, such as the United Nations and its eighteen specialized agencies and fourteen worldwide programs.” So much for subsidiarity. And in his encyclical, John Paul went on to observe that “from this mistaken conception of the person there arise both a distortion of the law ... and an opposition to private property.” Almost on cue, Boff proposes, as follow-up to his globalization scheme, a new economic order based on collectivizing natural resources.

This difficult, tortured treatise reaches its crescendo in Boff’s appeal to Saint Francis of Assisi. However, while Saint Francis envisioned a natural fraternity of man with creation, his approach was neither pantheistic nor political. Rather, it was rooted in the Christian faith that God, absolutely free in creating the cosmos, created a universe contingent upon his sovereign will. This Creator God is distinct from his creation and so precludes any pantheism such as that which figures so prominently in Boff. Saint Francis knew that Genesis 1:28 (“God blessed them, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth’”) was to be read in light of Genesis 2:15 (“The Lord God took man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it”). In that way, man has, not absolute sovereignty, but responsible stewardship, and he participates in the divine work of creation. A

Rev. John-Peter Pham is a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Peoria and an adjunct fellow of the Acton Institute.



Book News



The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture

Rodney Clapp, ed.
InterVarsity Press, 1998
 224 pp. Paperback: \$14.99

The Consuming Passion contains several fine essays addressing the important problem of consumerism from a variety of theological perspectives and traditions. Two essays in particular stand out for their theological sensitivity and deep understanding of the economic realities behind cultural problems.

Craig Gay, in his finely nuanced essay “Sensualists Without Heart,” argues that consumerism is the consequence of root presuppositions of modernity. In his words, the modern project is based upon “the deliberate decision to forswear philosophical and theological judgment ... for the sake of the comfort and convenience that were to be made possible by scientific and technological development.” Further, “we cannot seriously redress the problem of contemporary consumerism unless and until we are willing to address the problem of modernity itself.” Gay’s examination thus poses an important question: How much of modern free-market theory, which we rightly value for its efficient production of wealth, is tainted by principles antithetical to Christianity?

John Schneider’s essay, “On New Things,” combines deft theological analysis with economic understanding and is oriented toward “finding a model for seeking personal Christian vision in the culture of modern capitalism.” To this end, he explores two issues. First, he seeks to establish appropriate theological grounds for Christian involvement in market culture. Second, he

argues for the need to find this ground not only in the doctrine of Creation—common for Christian defenders of the free market—but also in Christology, “the final measure of human identity and purpose in the economic world.”

The themes in both Gay’s and Schneider’s essays are developed at length in two recent books by each: *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) and *Godly Materialism* (InterVarsity Press), respectively. Seek them out.

Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening

Vigen Guroian
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999
 64 pp. Paperback: \$9.00

“For some people,” C. S. Lewis writes approvingly, “what we call ‘the love of nature’ is a permanent and serious sentiment.” In his words, “What nature-lovers ... get from nature is an iconography, a language of images,” and though our theology proper must come from elsewhere, this iconography serves a valuable purpose in “incarnating” our belief. This is precisely what Vigen Guroian has done in *Inheriting Paradise*.

Guroian, professor of theology and ethics at Loyola College and an Armenian Orthodox believer, has combined serious theological reflection with his experience as a gardener to form a spirituality that is incarnational, liturgical, and sacramental. In this way, he argues that “gardening is nearer to godliness than theology.” With *Inheriting Paradise*, Guroian has given us a needed reminder of the theological seriousness of humankind’s relationship to creation.

—Gregory Dunn



Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Prosperity and Environmental Spirituality

Environmental thought is being used increasingly, not to preserve nature's beauty, but to restrict economic prosperity. As a priest, I am concerned about this movement, not only because I believe that economic development is good for the human family but also because, under the guise of environmentalism, certain heresies are making inroads into our houses of worship. Of late, we have witnessed the rise of what some have called a "green spirituality," said to blend nicely with traditional faith.

To be sure, there are aspects of religious environmental ethics that do express the traditional positive view of the created order articulated by the church throughout the centuries. Christianity teaches that the earth is the Lord's because it is His creation, and we are called to look upon the glories and beauties of creation as prime examples of God's hand at work in the cosmos. Further, the Scriptures call the human family to have a profound respect for that creation and not to squander resources that are entrusted to us for our use but, rather, to employ them wisely.

Let us insist, however, upon some elementary distinctions. Looking upon nature as a lens through which we see God's hand as author of creation is not the same as finding God Himself present exclusively in nature, much less substituting nature for God. Moreover, having respect for God's created order does not mean that it must not be used for the benefit of humankind; rather, a belief in the sanctity of life requires that we accept our responsibilities to have stewardly dominion over nature. That such statements are considered contestable is a troubling sign of how far certain dangerous strains of environmentalism have made inroads into traditional communities of faith.

In *Earth in the Balance*, widely praised as the consummate statement of the new environmentalism, Vice-President Al Gore admits that "the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual." On its

face, such is not wholly objectionable—Pope John Paul II has at times said as much, but has said it better—but Gore is asking us to reassess our spiritual place in the universe by renewing "a connection" not to God and not to other people but to the "natural world."

Such a view comes close to suggesting that the life of nature is more precious than that of human beings. It denigrates the status of human life; further, it likely would lead to a massive curbing of production, economic exchange, and innovation. In truth, we know from history and from

**Man's survival and thriving
depend on exercising responsible
dominion over creation.**

Christian teaching that man's survival and thriving depend on exercising responsible dominion over the world, cultivating creation, owning property, and transforming it to the betterment of the human condition, always with an

eye toward doing God's will.

In secular times such as ours, perhaps it is not surprising that strange theories that harken back to the errors of the early Christian centuries would come into play, even through massive popular movements such as an ill-conceived environmentalism that teaches ideas contrary to orthodoxy. We make, however, a profound error in attempting to graft those ideas onto orthodox faith. We risk falling prey to political agendas that would restrict economic advancement that would otherwise enhance human dignity.

The material prosperity that flows from free enterprise cannot save our souls. Neither can government restrictions on economic production. This much we can say: Free enterprise leads to a thriving of human community while state restrictions only impede the creativity of the human spirit. There is no theory of spirituality, however in tune with Mother Earth, that can morally justify preventing people from acting justly to make better lives for each other. *A*

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is the co-founder and president of the Acton Institute and a Roman Catholic priest. This essay is adapted from an article that appeared in The Detroit News, March 4, 1999.

“Saint Francis was not a lover of nature.... The phrase implies accepting the material universe as a vague environment, a sort of sentimental pantheism.... He did not call nature his mother; he called a particular donkey his brother or a particular sparrow his sister ... particular creatures assigned by their Creator to particular places; not mere expressions of the evolutionary energy of things.”

—G. K. Chesterton—

RELIGION & LIBERTY

A Publication of the Acton Institute for
the Study of Religion and Liberty

161 Ottawa Ave., NW, Suite 301
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Grand Rapids, MI
PERMIT NO. 986

Forwarding and Address
Correction Requested