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Tending Creation, Loving Neighbor, Honoring God



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R&L: Why did you choose the title, *The Virgin and the Dynamo*, for your book on religion and environmentalism?

Royal: I was looking for a vivid image of the apparent conflict in our modern deliberations over religion and the environment; in fact, we see the same conflict in trying to think through how modern science might be harmonized with our spiritual traditions. I found just the right image in the American historian Henry Adams's *Autobiography*, where one of his chapters is titled, "The Dynamo and the Virgin." Adams's is a curious case. Though not a Roman Catholic, he saw that something irreplaceable had been lost by the West's loss of the Virgin, by which he meant the whole set of beliefs and practices associated in the Middle Ages with a figure such as Our Lady of Chartres: beauty, emotional uplift, and a religious appreciation of nature. The Dynamo (Adams's term for the emerging world of science and technology, as well as the largely utilitarian approach to problems they brought with them) was not something Adams deplored. He believed that

knowledge of the physical world and the economic systems that made material advances available to a growing part of the population was a definite gain. In fact, he regretted not having studied science sufficiently to understand it better. At the same time, he was torn; he wanted the modern benefits but wished the older values of the Virgin could be somehow preserved. It is a tension we

all live with today, and that was what I wanted to suggest in the title.

R&L: In discussions about the environment, the words nature, creation, world, wilderness, and even environment are used interchangeably. Should they be distinguished?

Royal: The fact that we have so many different terms in play indicates that we are simultaneously thinking about several things that need to be distinguished. Let me start with *environment*, a technical term that suggests the way scientists talk about organisms living in an environment. That approach is fine for plants and animals, but, for human beings, it is inadequate. Physically, we live in an environment; yet human beings do more than respond to environmental stimuli. As the American novelist Walker Percy once pointed out, human beings, properly speaking, live in a world. A human world contains many things that natural science—despite its best efforts—cannot account for. To take just one example,

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we value things and make judgments of right and wrong. Science, which professes to be value-free, is forbidden to do that. Thus, when we think about creation, we inevitably bring our notions about the Creator into play. Even when we talk about *nature*, we may mean either something like the environment or the physical world plus those values that Henry Adams talked about.

Wilderness is the oddest concept of all. It suggests the desire of some for an “unspoiled” natural setting, but only because we find in that notion a value that, in some circumstances, we think important. Confusion about religion and environmentalism—the sheer difficulty of the subject aside—usually stems from the way people use one or more of these terms in discussion.

R&L: *In your view, what is the essential insight that biblical religion brings to questions of man’s place in the world and his obligations to it?*

Royal: For believers in the biblical tradition, the fact that our world is a creation alters everything. If we acknowledge that God created the world and human beings for his own purposes, nature takes on both a higher and a lower status. It becomes higher in that God clearly is communicating something of himself to us through the world. The old theolo-

gians believed nature was one of two books of revelation, the other being the Bible.

At the same time, the Bible warns against worshiping nature, not merely because in both ancient and modern times it often becomes a substitute for the true God, but because it also leads to neglect and sometimes mistreatment of our fellow men. Hitler, for instance, believed he was returning to nature (he was a vegetarian), but he thought the law of nature was, as we sometimes see in mere environments, the survival of the fittest and the rule of the stronger over the weaker. Nature is clearly not a model for human societies in that respect.

R&L: *In your book, you argue that a way toward greater clarity in environmental thinking is through revitalized reflection on the doctrine of Creation. What should be the contours of such a project?*

Royal: I try to make clear that when we begin to study God’s creation in earnest, we find not a static but a dynamic and developing system that we, as stewards, are not obliged to preserve forever as we find it. The great early-modern scientists understood themselves to be discovering the world that God actually created, not the one people imagined he had created. Our task is, therefore, quite complicated. Our dynamism, creativity, and development, at their best, mirror God’s, which is precisely what we would expect if we take seriously the biblical vision that we are created in God’s image. Of course, human beings may err, behave foolishly, or engage in outright malice, but the first and most important insight we should receive from the Bible is that our human powers need to be directed prudently in order to care for ourselves and for our neighbor, as well as to honor God. Caring for creation honors God and human beings, but it is not always easy to say to what extent seeking one good—say, feeding the hungry around the world—should permit us to accept certain environmental shifts.

R&L: *Much environmental sentiment places heavy emphasis on the conflict between nature (often described as pristine nature) and artifice. To your way of thinking, is this a true and helpful distinction?*

Royal: You raise one of the most difficult questions in this whole field. As human power has grown, we have begun to realize that there is some way in which so-called pristine nature is a value to us. In the nineteenth century, this realization led the United States to set aside land for preservation. The opposition between the pristine and the artificial, however, is not as neat as it appears. To begin with, as I have

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already mentioned, human artifice is, its misuse aside, a natural dimension of the world God created. The early phases of industrialization had a heavy impact on the earth. Today, however, our artifice has enabled us to do more with less—for example, growing more food for more people on less land. (And as a consequence, America and Europe have more forests today than they did a century ago.) It seems almost providential that, whatever our impact on ecosystems has been in the past, our instinctive love for wilderness and our cleverness in finding ways to meet human needs with a lighter human footprint were meant by God to lead us simultaneously to better stewardship and to more secure lives.

R&L: *How should the theological category of providence affect our view of nature?*

Royal: Nature and God's providence are, in strict theological terms, mysteries. We do not entirely understand why God made the world the way he did. We do know from Genesis that God looked upon creation and pronounced it good. We, therefore, must believe it so. But we also see many "natural" processes that do not appear—to us, at any rate—good: floods, earthquakes, killer asteroids, plagues, famines. In evolutionary terms, the challenges these natural phenomena present have led to higher organisms and more sophisticated human responses. Perhaps they were meant to. At the end of the day, however, we are left with Job's answer to the question of why "natural evils" exist: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

R&L: *In your book, you interact with a variety of religious approaches to thinking about the environment. By and large, where do they go right, and where do they go wrong?*

Royal: For me, every approach to the environment that uncovers truth helps, since truth is one of the names of God. We owe a great deal to the early environmental alarmists, for instance, because even though in hindsight they were often wrong in details, they raised some urgent questions for all of us. But, as in most fields, there is a tendency to substitute romantic longing and wishful thinking for the hard-headedness and soft-heartedness that I believe are the only solutions to environmental problems. Many ecologists, for example, seem ready to reduce human population so we can return to a simpler and allegedly better past. Populations are already shrinking in some parts of the world, after spectacular growth due to real human progress. I do not believe that

going back to a simpler past is possible, or even desirable. We need to intelligently move forward, not back.

There is also a host of what I think of as false religious responses to environmental issues. We see this most prominently among ecofeminists, Gaia enthusiasts, Deep Ecologists, and environmental justice advocates. There are, of course, valid insights in all of these movements, but, in general, they are deformed by a false nature mysticism and a failure to recognize the evil prevalent throughout the world to which we must respond responsibly.

It is hard to keep the right path. We need the very best science and the very best ethical and spiritual virtues as we go about the environmental task. We will fail at times, but,

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by and large, we have been doing surprisingly well now that we have recognized the nature of the problem. We need to be careful not to forego incremental gains for the environment for the sake of spiritual claims that usually do not look very carefully at nature. Many religious environmentalists give the impression that if we regain some mystical oneness with nature, all will be well. I find little evidence for such a oneness; we would do better to seek, in fear and trembling, to do the best that we are practically able.

R&L: *Once environmental issues have been thought through according to the theological framework you suggest, how should our economics be affected?*

Royal: Some very powerful environmental currents pit ecology against economics. I like to point out that they are both sciences of the household (*oikos*, in Greek). Some industries surely are irresponsible and exploitative, but, by and large, markets will be the path to better environmental behavior. Markets are far more efficient than the alternatives—a fact that the dirty old Soviet system, which had thousands of environmental regulations, proved beyond doubt. This efficiency will save resources. Furthermore, entrepreneurship will carry into every part of the world the technological innovations that will make the human impact on nature lighter. So the ecologist and the entrepreneur will often be found on the same side of the struggle in the future.

R&L: *And how should our politics be affected?*

Royal: Governments are helpful in enforcing laws that protect one entity from damaging another's property through pollution. They can also help in setting aside wilderness, simply because most people find it valuable and wish to preserve it for both aesthetic and environmental reasons. Governments can also foster market situations that encourage innovations good for the environment. Regulation, by contrast, has too many unintended consequences, as we have seen in the Endangered Species Act and the absurdities of the Superfund.

R&L: *In the course of your book, you strive to make the case for "intelligent development." How does it differ from "sustainable development"?*

Royal: I put God first, human beings second, then nature. Unfortunately, some of the large foundations and international agencies lately have put a straightjacket on practices they deem unsustainable, while people in the developing world languish for lack of food and economic growth. We can afford some unsustainability in certain parts of the world if we intelligently calculate that it can be offset by the overall benefits that accrue.

Anyone happening upon Japan or Hong Kong for the first time, for example, would think that such countries are tee-


Royal: Wisdom comes from God. No one possesses it absolutely. But, at the very least, wisdom would counsel us to recognize that we cannot solve all problems in this world and that we must often be content with inescapable tradeoffs. So we should say our prayers, sincerely bring all our gifts to the problems at hand, and recognize that success or failure ultimately lies elsewhere. Biblical believers, however, can at least be hopeful, for God does not abandon his people.

R&L: *Further, you seem to intimate that the Christian's posture toward creation should be one of wonder. What form should this take?*

Royal: It is an old pagan as well as a biblical concept that wonder at creation is the beginning of wisdom. I think some people living in the very heart of one of our great modern megalopolises may be invaded by wonder, but many also need direct contact with nature and contemplation of its beauties. Almost everyone, for example, feels a certain peacefulness when contemplating the ocean. It may have something to do with our sense of the sea as the physical origin of life on earth. Who knows? But I think it would not hurt for many more people to make time to come into direct contact with nature, God's other book of revelation. You do not have to hike Yosemite; you might just tend some flowers in your yard.

R&L: *I understand that you recently started a new organization, the Faith and Reason Institute. How do you envision this organization playing a role the religious environmental debate?*

Royal: As John Paul II has magnificently shown in his recent Encyclical Letter *Faith and Reason*, these two human traditions desperately need each other. Faith without reason is blind, and

reason without faith becomes heartless. In addition, as the pope has pointed out, reason without faith tends to become narrow. One way to read the history of the environment is as a progressive narrowing of our notions of reason to mere instrumental aims. That is largely over now, but we still need faith and reason to be constantly challenging each other to look further into the richness of reality, to appreciate it more exactly. The Faith and Reason Institute will be doing that in a variety of fields, including science and environmentalism. Obviously, it is a big subject, but the perpetual effort to be faithful to everything that we can be and that we can know is the great drama of human life. 

Entrepreneurship will carry into every part of the world innovations that will make the human impact on nature lighter. In the future, the ecologist and the entrepreneur will often be found on the same side of the struggle.

tering on the brink of collapse. They do not grow enough food for their people and seem to be overdeveloped in the industrial and economic sectors. They do not collapse, however, because they are wealthy enough to compensate for what might seem to be imbalances by participating in global markets. We need to seize carefully and intelligently the opportunities that exist for people to lift themselves out of poverty. Simply requiring a given area to practice "sustainability" is to neglect some of the intelligence that God has given us.

R&L: *You use the biblical concept of wisdom to describe what should be the hallmark of Christian thinking about the environment. What does this entail?*

Can Christian Theology Let the Trees Do the Talking?

John R. Schneider

In 1958, an eighty-seven-year-old Stoney Indian by the name of Walking Buffalo spoke to an audience in London, England. The question before him that day was something like: “Why, in the end, could white Americans and native Americans not get along?” He gave this extraordinary answer:

We were lawless people, but we were on pretty good terms with the Great Spirit, creator and ruler of all. You whites assumed we were savages. You didn’t understand our prayers.... We saw the Great Spirit’s work in almost everything: sun, moon, trees, wind, and mountains. Sometimes we approached Him through these things.

Did you know that the trees talk? Well, they do. They talk to each other, and they’ll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don’t listen. They never learned to listen to Indians, so I don’t suppose they’ll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.¹

Our purpose in this essay is not to explore this difference of cultures for its own sake. We are interested, rather, in what has become a widely held opinion about its significance, particularly for modern environmental theory, for it is very common nowadays to find serious people who believe that Walking Buffalo’s account (or something very like it) is also an elementary account of our modern environmental crisis. Moreover, the theory in view is famously anti-Christian in its analysis (even if old Walking Buffalo himself was not), so it is important for Christians to offer a credible defense against it. In the context of Walking Buffalo’s answer, then, with its implied criticism of Euro-American religious culture, our purpose is to offer the broad outline of just such a defense.

Whether we prefer to call it the Gaia Hypothesis, as is commonly done, or something else, the regnant environmental view consists of at least three parts. The first simply is that our way of treating the environment grows quite directly

from our metaphysics. And, indeed, we take this part of the thesis to be true. The second part, however, is somewhat more controversial. It is that Euro-American society generally has the wrong sort of metaphysics. The worldview we do have, so the argument goes, is so human-centered and so thoroughly utilitarian at its core that it cannot but lead to environmental problems. It follows, then, that for the right sort of environmental solutions to emerge, we must replace—or seriously revise—the dominant worldview. For the sake of argument, we shall not dispute this part of the theory, either. One might dispute it on several levels, but in a very general way it is obviously true to say that the wrong sort of environmental metaphysics has spread pretty widely throughout our society. Our interest, however, is more basically in the alleged underlying causes of this mentality and in what may be done about it, which leads to the third and (for us) most crucial part of the theory.

The Challenge of Environmental Metaphysics to Christian Theology

The last and main part of the theory, then, owes its essential form to the work of Lynn White, Jr., who made it famous in his 1967 *Science* article, “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” His thesis has since become an almost unquestioned dogma in the global environmental movement. Its main point is that for modern societies to redeem the environment, they must adopt in their deep cultural worldview something akin to the intuition that Walking Buffalo’s answer enshrines. The intuition is that nature is no mere thing to be exploited by humans but something sacrosanct or even sacred (provided one has room for religion). The idea is that we humans must learn to treat nature more as we would treat a person (so Gaia, “Mother Earth,” becomes a working metaphor even for spiritually hardened scientists). At the same time, we must also learn new (actually quite old) intuitions about ourselves. We must stop this Cartesian Enlightenment nonsense of viewing ourselves in the abstract as the rational masters of nature and must somehow come back to the ancient understanding that we are but a part of the larger ecological whole. We must replace our destructive, human-centered, utilitarian

1. Cited in T. C. McLuhan, *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971), 23.

worldview with some updated version of this redemptive, quasi-aboriginal one. In sum, we must, at long last, get together with the trees and have a talk.

Now there is much here to invite discussion. What most concerns this essay, however, is the way in which theorists such as White elaborate this thesis into a wholesale critique of Christianity. What they argue is that the destructive, human-centered, utilitarian consciousness is built right into the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to White and his supporters, the roots of our environmental crisis sink deeply into the worldview of ancient Judaism. On the one hand, as is well known, the Hebrews socked it to all the neighboring myths by de-mythologizing nature, extracting from it all vestiges of divine being and agency. On the other hand, as is also well known, they elevated themselves to a status heretofore not enjoyed by the human species: God made human beings in his own image and gave to them dominion over the earth and everything in it (Gen. 1:26). From this status follows the extraordinary license to go forth, to fill the earth, and to *subdue* it (Gen. 1:28). The rest, as they say, is history. At any rate, the conclusion is that the core metaphysics of Christianity is really just the destructive, human-centered, utilitarian one in an ancient narrative form. If we are to get rid of that destructive metaphysics and replace it with a re-

verely weakened supremacy, or the like (recommendations are notoriously unclear on this point). And in doing this, of course, we must believe that Christianity is false, or at least incompatible in its metaphysics with these requisite environmental notions. How ought Christians to respond?

Hebrews Removed Nature's Divinity But Not Its Sacredness

The Christians who have responded do so in two typically distinct ways. One approach is to reject both of the above claims and to argue that some concept of human dominion or supremacy is, in fact, compatible with sound environmental ethics. Perhaps we may classify this common sort of approach as benign utilitarianism, in much the way certain people once defended the notion of a benevolent monarchy. (See, for instance, Geoffrey Lilburne's *A Sense of Place*.) The disadvantages of this otherwise quite coherent approach thus resemble those of that defense of royalty. The trees will not so much talk, according to this view, as just hope for the best.

The second sort of approach, however, is to downplay the notion of human supremacy. This approach is typical of the Christian "green" movement. As far as we can tell, its representatives offer nothing like a defense of the notion of human dominion but, instead, ignore it to the extent that the uninformed person might never know it existed in biblical tradition, much less that it is at its metaphysical and moral core. The deficiencies of this second approach are thus as great as the extent to which that notion of human supremacy is, in fact, important to our Christian worldview. On this one, we agree with White. The notion of human supremacy is basic to our Christian metaphysics and ethics.

Without it, we cannot but weaken our

claim that human beings have value, dignity, and rights that are transcendentally greater than whatever value, dignity, and rights we may confer upon non-human beings. This weakening is the cause of great confusion in the environmental movement at large (one needs to read but a few lines of any contemporary animal rights theory), and, to an extent, the "green" countercultural Christians invite that confusion into their own engagement of the culture.

It would be best if Christians had a coherent environmental view that contained two sorts of beliefs. The one would be that nature has a status, value, and dignity that is much greater than what one instinctively confers upon a mere thing. The second would be that the biblically correct notion of

The biblical notion of human dominion entails something very like the intuition we need about the sacredness (not just goodness) of the natural realm.

— *John R. Schneider*



demptive worldview, we must also get rid of Christianity and replace it with some other ideology. The rest of this essay, then, shall mainly focus upon this critique of the Christian faith.

The larger thesis has, in the background, two assertions on what our environmental metaphysics must include. First, we must believe that nature has something like a spiritual or sacred standing, value, dignity (even rights), and so on. Second, we must believe that we humans do not have a status that makes us transcendentally superior to nature. We must believe, that is, that the strong notion of human supremacy that has shaped Western civilization is mistaken. Instead, we must adopt some version of human non-supremacy, or se-

human supremacy, or dominion, is consistent with the first one. Is that plausible? It is. In fact, the biblically correct notion of human dominion actually entails something very like the intuition we need about the sacredness (not just goodness) of the natural realm.

Let us first consider the claim that, in Hebrew religion, nature is downsized from a “Thou” to an “it.” Everyone in the discussion knows that the Hebrews did take the divinity out of nature, but did they also take away its sacredness, or even its agency? In brief, two large themes of the biblical text make us think otherwise. The one is the famous narrative of Creation in Genesis 1, where God declares the things he has made to be “good,” and then declares the whole of his creation to be “very good.” Of course, this language includes the protecting notion that God did not build evil into the world. But it goes deeper still. The mode of the language is undoubtedly not just philosophical or ethical but religious. Many studies support the common Jewish understanding that it expresses a *blessing*, which means that it refers to something holy, something sacred. Furthermore, this intuition about nature gains strength in other contexts, such as in Psalm 19, where nature “declares” God’s glory, or in Romans 8, where it “groans” in a disposition of agonized faith that Christ’s kingdom will come to set it free. Whatever else they mean, both passages prove that personal agency contains useful analogies for how to think rightly about nature. On this view, then, the trees do, in fact, engage in something that, by analogy anyway, we may consider as “talking.”

Second, however, as J. Richard Middleton has shown beyond controversy, the strong notion of human dominion is indeed at the core of Scripture’s vision of human being and purpose. He writes, “As my own survey of the field of Old Testament studies has revealed ... there is a virtual consensus among Old Testament scholars concerning the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis.”² So how can the Christian most plausibly refute White’s and others’ charge that this notion entails—or is the root of—license to exploit the earth? How, indeed, may we understand this notion as consistent with the previous one, that nature is holy?

The answer is in the biblical idiom that Middleton and many others present. In that idiom, and in ancient Near Eastern idiom in general, the expression *image of God* indeed

referred to the monarch and conferred upon the monarch royal status. However, it also expressed the monarch’s proper function, which was to be a true representative, or agent, of divine rule. This is the part of the idiom that White and others have failed to take into account. It implies that ruling is a polymorphous concept, or a task-verb. That is to say, it refers to a task that may be accomplished by quite a variety of means, so we need to know by which means it is supposed to be executed. If one is the Pharaoh of Egypt, the task will take one form, but it will take quite another if one is the ruler of Assyria. If one is, however, an Israelite (or a modern Christian), in this context it means something remarkably obvious once one thinks about it.

Without the notion of human supremacy, we cannot but weaken our claim that human beings have value, dignity, and rights that are transcendentally greater than those we may confer upon non-human beings.

Representing God Entails Seeking the Good of Creation

The God to be represented has identified himself in and through these narrative actions of creation. This God has used his vast power for the unambiguous good of other beings. By giving them the status of *being* “beings,” he has done for them the greatest good of all. Moreover, he has spoken and made clear that these beings are not just good in the utilitarian sense, or even in the moral and aesthetic senses of goodness. He has declared his view of them as good in the religious sense. They are, as parts and as a whole, sacred. Now from all this it follows that representing this God must include representing precisely these beliefs about creation, this metaphysics of the environment, as it were. So it is, then, that the correct concept of dominion (precious as it is for other reasons), for Christians, entails the view that nature is sacred. Of course, we must take care to work out in precise detail what this general claim might mean. But as we do so, we may at least stop carrying on, every so often, and let the trees do some of the talking. We might be pleasantly challenged by what they have been waiting to say. ☺

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2. J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24 (September, 1994): 11.

The Ecological Garden

Vigen Guroian

... the Lord formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, ... took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it. (Gen. 2:7-8, 15 nrsv)

For much of February the ground in Maryland was snow-covered. Now, on this first day of March, the temperature is almost sixty degrees Fahrenheit and the snow is gone, but the soil in my vegetable garden is still too damp to turn over. Working with the spade will only produce earthen clumps that harden in the sun and make it impossible to seed properly. Scarlett, my Irish Setter, has other things in mind. She certainly delights in sniffing out the wayward mole in my vegetable garden or pushing about with her nose the two resident box turtles. But, more than this, Scarlett revels in racing over fields and streams. With wild waves of her crowned head, she beckons me to mark trail for other parts.

Near our home lies an expanse of woods and meadows, some two thousand acres of them, which is called Soldiers Delight. Twenty-five thousand years ago, the climate of central Maryland was dry and hot, and prairies stretched far and wide. Since then, man and nature have conspired to keep portions of Soldiers Delight looking much as they did in bygone days. When the climate cooled and got wetter, and hardwood forests began to spring up, native peoples burned the ground for hunting. Nature contributed a nutrient-poor soil conglomerate that the scientists call serpentine. It is composed of eroded outcroppings of metamorphic rock that were mined in the nineteenth century for their chromium content. And, in recent years, the state of Maryland has been cutting back large swaths of scrub pines that have encroached on the meadows and are smothering the rare, sun-loving flora.

This is the first occasion since the snow has melted that Scarlett and I have hiked in Soldiers Delight. A week of unusually warm weather has transformed what we last saw. There are signs of spring in the greening moss along the trail and the distant croaking of a woodfrog. We enter from the high ground of the northeast quadrant and descend a ridge densely forested with deciduous trees. At the bottom we cross

several small streams swollen by the thaw, leave the trail, and cut across swampy ground where rusty spears of skunk cabbage have thrust up through the muddy soil.

As Scarlett and I ascend a steep, forested hillside, I breathe in the sweet, musty scent of decaying oak leaves. Further on, we cross meadows carpeted with tall amber grass that ripples in the strong wind. There are few signs of spring here, but the grass emits heat with exciting sunlit shimmer. When I was a boy, I would steal to such spots for protection from the cold March wind. I would press the pliant straw beneath me and lay on my back in that silky bed, soaking in the radiant heat, watching animal clouds chase across the sky.

I observe how the felling of pines has opened these meadows and let them breathe. I wonder, however, why the stumps were left sticking up two feet high. Why weren't they cut level to the ground? My gardener's eye objects. One day at the break of dawn, I watched as a mist lifted from the cool earth and a black nimbus cloud blotted out the sun. I imagined that I was standing in a field of sooty stove pipes venting earth's infernal bowels. I felt far removed from Paradise.

I repeat, my gardener's eye protests. This *is* a garden, after all. That's the way I see it. Whether I am in my vegetable rows or in Soldiers Delight, I am Adam east of Eden, struggling to make the earth like Paradise, until Resurrection Day when the Gardener and his Mother, the Garden's Opened-Gate, will welcome me back in. I learned my ecology in wood and vegetable patch. But I am as uncomfortable with the deep ecology people who try to persuade me that I am an interloper in "Nature" as those other folks who look upon "mere nature" as raw resource for raising the **gnp**. The way I understand the biblical story, Adam was drawn from out of the earth. And he "grew" in the garden together with flowers and trees of all kinds. We are not interlopers, and insofar as we are exiles from Paradise, we must heal our broken relationships not only with one another and with God, but also with the whole of the rest of creation. God wants us to cultivate this world and offer it as a gift of our thanksgiving that he may bless in the consummate crowning season.

I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing;

and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord....
(Ezek. 34:26–27 nrsv)

Both parties are mistaken. Adam cast out east of Eden is no less a cultivator and tender of the earth than he was before his expulsion. But the task is more difficult.

[I]n toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread....

(Gen. 3:17–18 nrsv)

Sin has entered our bodies and is broadcast over the whole of creation. So I think it is naïve to believe that human beings will use the earth well if they are left alone to pursue their own self-interest.

The garden is economy in the deep meaning of that word—a place where “housekeeping” is done. It is not a field of *laissez-faire*, nor will it conform always to human design. I am able to garden because there are reliable laws, but I cannot credit my own labor for last summer’s exquisitely sweet tomatoes. Dry weather at just the right moment of the growing season brought this about. Those sweet tomatoes were a gift of nature’s astonishing indeterminacy.

The garden is the ground of my humility, as the whole earth should be also. I did not create the butterfly or the spider, nor do I possess the beauty of the one or the skill of the other. They, together with the rest of creation, declare a grander design and have a value that is theirs quite independent of me. I said that I have learned ecology from gardening. But, for me, gardening has grown into a much greater metaphor than mere science says. People speak of Soldiers Delight as a “reserve.” But what is it reserved from and for whom? Adam has been in it from the beginning, or at least as long as human beings can recollect. I think we need to abandon the distinction between so-called wilderness, which we are not to spoil, and the rest of nature, which is at our disposal. This “policy” is not just calamitous for nature but for our humanity as well. It is easy to see how it is damaging to nature since we feel free to use most of it selfishly. But are strip malls any less objectionable than strip mines? One could argue that strip malls are more destructive

since they not only ruin nature but also pollute and disfigure human culture.

Nature and culture are not opposites. There is a “natural” creation, and it points to a Creator; and there is the human being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), whose “nature” is culture. Paradise is not wilderness. Paradise is a garden cultivated by Adam and blessed by God. Soldiers Delight *is* a garden, and it *is* human culture. If men do not practice horticulture and husbandry over it, Soldiers Delight may take a course that is bad for the tiny bluet and the delicate birdfoot violet, the whip-poor-will and the fence lizard, all of whom thrive in the sunny meadows. These are the true alternatives that have existed ever since our ancestral parents ate from the forbidden tree and were cast out of Eden.

Important voices of my own Eastern Christian faith argue that it is not the mere eating from that tree in disobedience that led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. They fell and were expelled because they took the fruit of that tree greedily and with arrogance. The fourth-century father Saint Ephrem the Syrian writes:

Whoever has eaten
of that fruit
either sees and is filled with delight,



God wants us to cultivate this world and offer it as a gift of our thanksgiving that he may bless in the consummate crowning season.

— *Vigen Guroian*

or he sees and groans out.
The serpent incited them to eat in sin
so that they might lament;
having seen the blessed state,
they could not taste of it—
like the hero of old (Tantelus)
whose torment was doubled
because in his hunger he could not taste
the delights which he beheld.

(Hymns on Paradise 3:8)

Our abuse of creation is the continuation of this original sin, this selfish consumption of those things the Lord has declared good. We presume that we may use the rest of na-

ture as we see fit, since it is the property of individual or state. But the psalmist has another vision: “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1 nkjv).

I do not question our need of nature as source of sustenance, resource for shelter from the elements, or subject and medium of the arts and sciences. God calls upon us to be “gardeners” in order to learn how to “use” nature lovingly and responsibly. We need this wisdom today, lest we be consumed by our consumer culture. The Fall is man’s descent into matter without spirit; it is the movement of humanity into the world without a vision of creation as manifestation of God’s hidden and sacred being. In their speech and actions, the two opposing parties who dominate our age betray this fall into materialism and secularity. Both exhibit a profoundly deficient anthropology and bad theology. The one seeks to protect “Nature” from destructive humanity. It forgets that without man, creation is purposeless and is mute: that alone it is unable to praise its Maker. The seventh-century Byzantine churchman Leontis of Neapolis reminds us wisely:

The creation does not venerate the Creator through itself directly, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon offers him homage, through me the stars ascribe glory to him, through me the waters, rain and dew, with the whole creation, worship and glorify him.


Nature exists for humanity, but only so that humanity may raise matter to spirit. The second party is blind to this. It believes that nature exists for man with few or no constraints as to its consumption, other than rules of utility. This is an exalted view of human freedom that sets human beings radically apart from the rest of creation. It is an impious philosophy in the deepest and most troubling sense of that word. Such an attitude lacks compassion or concern for purity and is disrespectful of the integrity of creation and of the holiness of God.

We modern folk are faced from within ourselves by what G. K. Chesterton describes as Christian truths gone mad. Some of us uphold the value of creation as if it is its own measure, as if nature is God. Others uphold the freedom of man, as if man is entitled to act independently of God, in place of God. Biblical faith declares another view. God, who called all that he created good, put Adam in the Garden “to cultivate and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15 njb). God granted Adam the privilege to name the animals, not the prerogative to maim them. Adam was to discover in those names their relationship not only to human beings but also to God. Naming is a form of thanksgiving. Parents know this instinctively.

When the author of the Book of Genesis says that Adam was drawn from the earth and made alive by the breath of God, that writer does not mean, as even many Christians seem to think, that the earth is our baseness and the breath of God, our grandeur. Such thoughts lead to the debasement not only of human life but of all life. It is wrong to think that the birds of the air and the animals of the field are without the Spirit. The Spirit hovered over creation from the beginning, as it did over Jesus in the Jordan. And the creatures that graze were the first to greet the child in the manger.

The Word became flesh. This means that God mixed himself inextricably and eternally with the earth and all its elements. He breathed in the breath of the ox and ass. He drank the press of the vine and ate the bread of the grain. He sweated in the desert sun and was refreshed by the evening shower. God became man, and he gardened our humanity from within and without. It is our task to be apprentices of the Master Gardener. He invites us to use our freedom responsibly for the sake of all living things. Saint Paul reminds us:

The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. The world of creation cannot as yet see reality, not because it chooses to be blind, but because in God’s purpose it has been limited—yet it has been given hope. And that hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change of and decay, and have its share in the magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God. (Rom. 8:18 ff., J. B. Phillips trans.)

The redemption of our bodies constitutes the hope of the whole physical world—that it, too, may be raised up in the Spirit to eternal life. Gardening is a metaphor and sacramental sign of that wondrous work of resurrection wrought by God in Jesus Christ. He, who by his spilt blood revealed the barren Cross as the fruitful Tree of Life, enjoins the whole of creation in a joyful song of praise as Paradise grows up from the ground of our beseeching. 

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A Declaration of the Rights of Land

A Review Essay by Marc D. Guerra

Lord Acton observed that “few discoveries are more irritating than those that expose the pedigree of ideas.” Acton’s remark highlights the kind of uneasiness that present-day environmentalists undoubtedly must experience. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the idea that the earth’s flora and fauna should be actively protected is not the product of the ideological Left. The modern effort to preserve endangered nature was the brainchild of a Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt. Motivated in part by his love of outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing, Roosevelt convened a series of official conferences dedicated to what he simply called “conservation.” As its name suggests, the political movement of conservation principally was concerned with conserving existing wilderness and wildlife. The conservation movement viewed access to and enjoyment of nature as a genuine human good. The conservation of nature and of natural resources was something, therefore, that was in the best interest of human beings.

This understanding of the reason for conserving nature is not shared by contemporary environmentalism. Mainline environmentalism characteristically is suspicious of the kind of robust enjoyment of nature Roosevelt sought to preserve. From environmentalism’s perspective, the conservation movement falsely assumed that nature exists primarily for human beings’ enjoyment. Consequently, it failed to see that nature actually needs to be protected from, not preserved for, human beings. According to the worldview of mainline environmentalism, human beings are the great “despoilers” of nature. This dramatic shift in perspective helps explain why contemporary environmentalists are more likely to call for the cleaning up of industrial chemical dumps than conserving and game-managing existing wetlands.

Somewhere between the conservation and the environmental movements, there was the short-lived “ecological movement.” During the middle of the twentieth century, this

school of thought sought to “reintegrate” human beings into the natural world. Amid the remarkable industrial development that followed World War II, the ecological movement tried to remind human beings that they, too, were “natural” and thus periodically needed to “get back to nature.” Nineteen nintey-nine marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of one of the most celebrated books of the ecological movement, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. A graduate of the Yale Forestry School, Leopold served nineteen years in the United States

Forest Service. At the age of forty-six, Leopold was appointed professor of game management in the Agricultural Economics Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. One year after Leopold’s death, his *Sand County Almanac* was published to rave reviews in the *New York Times*. Looking back at this sprightly written book, one clearly sees what the ecological movement tried to correct in the idea of conservation and

how this correction eventually gave birth to the modern environmental movement.

The Ethics of “Ecological Evolution”

Leopold divided *A Sand County Almanac* into three parts. The first part chronicles his observations of the monthly changes in the Wisconsin countryside over the course of a calendar year. The second section brings together several short essays that Leopold wrote about his experiences of wildlife in Oregon, Arizona, Iowa, and other places. But Leopold’s book is best known for the “philosophical questions” raised in its final section, titled “The Upshot.” Leopold here traces the current ecological threat nature faces back to the Western world’s “Abrahamic concept of land.” While his perspective is less developed than Lynn White’s classic argument in “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Leopold also sees today’s ecological crisis as having biblical roots. The Bible perniciously teaches man “exactly what

*A Sand County Almanac
and Sketches Here and There*
by Aldo Leopold

Oxford University Press
256 pp. Cloth: \$25.00

the land is for, [namely] to drip milk and honey into [his] mouth.” The Bible teaches human beings that, in fulfilling their own selfish desires, they are free to “exploit” and to “conquer” nature. Within this framework, it is impossible to affirm the “natural goodness” of the earth. Nature is to be viewed simply in terms of its “economic value.” In sharp contrast to the actual self-understanding of the Christian or Jew, Leopold claims that the Bible fosters an anthropocentric worldview. For Leopold, the Bible views nature “as raw material” that can, and ought to, be used to fulfill human beings’ every need and desire.

Over and against this “wrong-headed” Abrahamic conception of nature, Leopold sets forth “a land ethic” that offers a more “biotic view of the world.” This “symbiotic vision” of human beings’ relation to nature “enlarges” their understanding of the members of their community. Leopold’s land ethic personifies all members of the “biotic community ... to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” For Leopold, “land” should be respected not because of its utility or the enjoyment it gives human beings, but, remarkably, because of its “biotic rights.” Leopold does not say what these biotic rights actually are. Rather, he limits himself to stating that the earth’s flora and fauna have “a biotic right” to continued existence. For

The kind of mastery of nature to which Leopold objects has its origins in the explicit rejection of the biblical view of human beings’ relation to nature.

— Marc D. Guerra



Leopold, the land, like human beings in Hobbes’ state of nature, has a basic right to self-preservation.

Leopold realizes that in order for this biotic worldview to take hold, human beings will have to “rethink” their place in the world. To begin with, they must begin to think of themselves not as “conquerors of the land-community but *plain members and citizens of it.*” Human beings, plants, birds, beasts, and insects are all *equal* members of the same “biotic team.” For Leopold, this is simply a fact of “ecological evolution.” His land ethic “merely attempts” to extend the social conscience of existing ethical systems to land itself. In practical terms, Leopold’s land ethic states that only those actions that “preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of

the biotic community ... [are] ethically legitimate.” In Leopold’s view, a land ethic requires human beings to possess a sense of “intellectual humility.” It “reminds” them that they do not possess a privileged place in the world of nature. In fact, the land ethic reveals that human beings ultimately are shaped by the all-encompassing biotic community. (Along these lines, Leopold extols the virtues of what he calls “an ecological interpretation of history.” Such historical analysis allegedly could explain the reasons behind events such as the Civil War “far better” than analyses that interpret such events “solely” as the work “of human enterprise.” Leopold perversely goes so far as to ask if the Civil War—America’s greatest moral and political test—could have been avoided had “the cane-lands of Kentucky ... only given us some worthless sedge, shrub, or weed.”) Only by renouncing their “proud” belief that they are superior to other natural beings, claims Leopold, will human beings be able to extend the social conscience from people to land.

Leopold consequently views “the present conservation movement as the embryo of” an “ethical relationship to wilderness.” For as laudable as it is, in the end, the conservation movement does not affirm the inherent goodness of nature. Rather, the conservationist “values land” solely on the basis of its economic, recreational, and aesthetic utility. Even more disturbing for Leopold is the fact that the conservation movement stops short of reintegrating human beings back into the natural world. Leopold observes that insofar as it views nature in terms of utility, the conservation movement is incapable of seeing what the biotic world can tell us about ourselves. As Leopold rightly points out, conservation recognizes that nature is good for man, but it fails to see that man himself is natural.

For these reasons, Leopold believes that the conservation movement must give way to an ecologically sound education. But Leopold suspects that even this may not be enough. Anticipating the more radical environmental activism of our time, Leopold naïvely, and rather disturbingly, looks forward to the day when “a militant minority of wilderness-minded citizens ... [will] be on watch throughout the nation, and available for action in a pinch.”

Evolution and Ecology: Continuity or Discontinuity?

To be sure, there is an element of truth in Leopold’s criticisms of the conservationists’ understanding of the relationship of human beings to nature. The conservation movement was right to affirm that the enjoyment of nature represents

an authentic human good, but it stopped short of asking why this is a human good, or what the enjoyment of this good can tell us about human beings. However, this is because conservation—and, for that matter, environmentalism—is primarily a political movement. In this sense, the ecologists’ “nature study” is intellectually deeper than either conservationist or environmentalist ideology.

Leopold sees Darwinian theory as providing the actual basis for reintegrating human beings back into “the biotic community.” Leopold praises Darwinian theory for providing a “first glimpse of the origin of species.” “The odyssey of evolution” reveals that human beings are “*only* fellow-travelers with other creatures.” In Leopold’s mind, the ecologist builds on this fundamental insight. Having learned from evolutionary theory of his “kinship with other fellow-creatures,” the ecologist discovers the true grounds of the land ethic: that all members of the biotic community should respect each other’s right “to live and let live.”

There is, however, something fundamentally incoherent about Leopold’s position. On the one hand, he accepts Darwinian theory as a basic fact. What is more, he thinks the odyssey of evolution is ongoing, since the “biotic enterprise ... never stops.” Darwinian theory shows that human beings do not occupy a privileged place in the natural world. The human animal is himself part of nature. It makes no sense, therefore, for human beings to view nature as something extrinsic, something that is there simply to be used. On the other hand, Leopold claims human beings have a responsibility to act unlike any other natural being. People should act reasonably with other living beings. They should “live and let live.” By some kind of twisted logic, Leopold both claims that man is king of the *beasts* and that, as king, he has a moral obligation to rule benevolently.

What Leopold fails to realize is that one must look outside of Darwinian theory for the kind of moral ethic he wishes to establish. One cannot lower human beings to the level of all other living beings—as, say, animal rights advocates do—and simultaneously argue that they have a moral obligation to treat other living beings ethically. Leopold’s argument for the “renaturalization” of human beings, in the end, would make them the most unnatural products of evolution. Ecology’s admirable effort to reintegrate human beings into nature and to make them aware of their obligation to dumb nature, in other words, *requires* one to admit that as rational animals, human beings differ from other natural beings almost in kind.


Adam, Eve, and the Conquest of Nature

Leopold’s inability to make this fundamental distinction is largely due to his failure to grasp the basic difference be-

tween the biblical and the modern scientific understandings of human beings and nature. Contrary to Leopold’s claims, the Bible, which admittedly has little to say about how human beings concretely relate to nature, does not encourage the conquest of nature. Rather, it enjoins human beings, who alone are said to be created in God’s image and likeness, to “subdue” and to “guard” nature. To be sure, it makes clear that the earth and its flora and fauna, which God in fact calls “very good,” are created for human beings. But the Bible also makes clear that as stewards of nature, human beings are to use reason when ruling over nature. Reason requires human beings to respect both the goodness of created nature *and* the divinely appointed limits that it places on them. In short, the biblical notion of mastery over nature requires human beings to rule nature with an eye to the good of all of creation, not merely to their own private good.

The kind of mastery of nature to which Leopold actually objects has its origins in the explicit rejection of the biblical (and Greek philosophic) view of human beings’ relation to nature. Francis Bacon and René Descartes, the two founders of modern natural science, opposed premodern thought’s fundamentally *receptive* stance towards nature. Rejecting teleology, they emphasized the mechanistic lawfulness of nature. Denying natural purposefulness, modern natural science sought to “put nature to the test.” By subjecting nature to endless “vexations,” it sought to make human beings “masters and possessors” of nature. In short, it was modern natural science, not the Bible, that set in motion the idea that nature should be conquered for “the relief of man’s estate.”

Both the problem Leopold sees in conservationist thought and ecology’s unintended exacerbation of this problem underscore modern thought’s inability to reintegrate human beings into nature. Ecologists such as Leopold are aware of the sound human and scientific reasons for reintegrating human beings back into the natural world. But as long as they cling to modern science’s view of the unnaturalness of human beings, they cannot say why such reintegration is desirable, nor can they offer any principled reason why human beings ought to exercise special care for nature.

These are precisely the key points to which the Christian notion of stewardship has something important to say. Christianity thus finds itself in a unique position in today’s environmental debates. Presently, Christianity stands alone in its simultaneous ability to articulate the privileged position human beings occupy in nature as well as the obligation that this position entails. 

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Book News

Flight Maps:

Adventures with Nature in Modern America

Jennifer Price

Basic Books

xxii + 325 pp. Hardcover: \$24.00

Toward the end of her curiously written study of twentieth-century meanings of nature, Jennifer Price poses an insightful question: “Why have we [of the baby boom generation] been looking for nature with our credit cards?” Her question’s immediate context is her analysis of The Nature Company, the chain of ecology boutiques found in upscale shopping malls. She is uneasy with these stores, chiefly for their deft marriage of nature appreciation and affluent consumerism, a union of strange bedfellows that, in her view, allows modern Americans (to attempt) to have both “ravenous resource use ... and restraints on rampant materialism.”

The wellspring of these contradictory desires is, in Price’s view, the venerable categories of nature and artifice. The first taps into the deep—and deeply American—mythology of nature as “Out There” and “A Place Apart” untainted by the marring hand of man. The second, by default, encompasses everything else—the full range of human culture, convention, and contrivance. Price chronicles the development of the meanings of nature and artifice through five historical vignettes, each emblematic of Americans’ “missed connections” with the natural world: the extinction of the passenger pigeon in the late 1880s; the crusade against women’s bird hats in the early 1890s; the rise of The Nature Company and its imitators in the 1980s; the “greening” of television in the 1990s; and, finally, “at the book’s physical, chronological, and interrogative center,” a “brief natural history of the plastic pink flamingo.”

For Price, this garish lawn decoration is iconic of the ways Americans have maintained “the strict boundary between Nature and Artifice—and the definition of Nature as a Place Apart, with which we draw it.” The plastic pink flamingo is the epitome of Artifice. Yet, in truth, “the plastic pink flamingo is literally real and wholly natural. It is the nature that has been mined, harvested, heated, and shipped.... [I]t is nature mixed with artifice.” In this way, Price confesses that “nature has more human artifice in it than I’ve tended to think. And artifice has more nature.” Maintaining a strict distinction between the natural and the artificial, Price contends, is

false and stymies clear thinking about how to view and value both the nature we preserve and the nature we consume.

What should be the content of these valuations? Price is hesitant to say any more than that “we have to bring ... an

eye—ecologically, morally, socially—for what’s better, truer, more useful.” But Price remains silent as to what standards determine the ecological, the moral, and the social. In the end, this silence limits Price’s conclusions about the real and desirable relationship between man and nature, though her critique of the false distinction between nature and artifice is a helpful first step.

Heaven Is Not My Home:

Living in the Now of God’s Creation

Paul Marshall, with Lela Gilbert

Word Publishing

x + 269 pp. Hardcover: \$17.99

In Marshall’s words, “this book is merely an attempt to give a brief overview of our *spiritual orientation* as we live as God’s people in God’s world.” To this end, he presents and applies the classic theological grid of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation to learning, work, rest, and play, as well as to an appropriate view of the natural world, political life, artistic endeavors, and technology. While not essentially a book on environmental issues, in these last four areas Marshall does provide helpful insights for thinking about the Christian’s responsibility in caring for creation.

To cite one example, Marshall writes, “what began in the Garden of Eden culminates in a city—the New Jerusalem. Creation includes culture as well as nature.” Therefore, man and his works should not be seen as alien to the created order but as an essential part of it. Furthermore, not only are human beings an integral part of the created order, but they are also to be responsible stewards of creation, treating the things in the world “the way that God calls us to treat them.” Along with the great freedom we have in developing aspects of creation, we have great responsibility for its care. Finally, stewardship is fundamentally linked with worship, for “we are the stewards of the earth, the shapers of human life and culture. Since our worship shapes who we are, it also shapes what we create.” In this way, all of human life is essentially religious.

While Marshall’s arguments hang upon a framework of serious theological reflection, his style is highly accessible. This introduction to Christian worldview thinking is one of the best to appear in recent years.

—Gregory Dunn

Toward Responsible Stewardship




What does Christianity teach about the place of the environment in political and personal ethics? I can think of no clearer statement than that provided by Pope John Paul II in his 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*. In one passage, the pope addresses environmental issues by saying that ecological problems result when “man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error.... Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and, in a certain sense, create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God’s prior and original gift of the things that are.”

The pope then moves to an environmental problem he considers “more serious”: the “destruction of the human environment, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves.” In particular, he calls attention to man’s sinful nature and the need for man to respect the “natural structure and moral structure with which he has been endowed.” The first and fundamental structure for human ecology is the family, through which a person receives formative ideas about truth and goodness and the faith. “The family is sacred,” says the pope. “It is the place in which life, the gift of God, can be properly welcomed and protected against the attacks to which it is exposed and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth.”

Underlying the pope’s statements is an idea fundamental to the entire Judeo-Christian religious tradition—that man is given primacy in the created order. This fact, however, also brings with it several important implications with regard to the environment: first, man is to use the resources of the earth responsibly and to the betterment of all of human society; second, goodness and evil are not embedded in the material world itself but are brought to the material world by the choices we make about whether to follow God’s commandments; and, finally, the sanctity of life must be the primary concern of human political and economic organization. Indeed, respecting God’s created order does not mean that

The entire Judeo-Christian religious tradition assumes that man is given primacy in the created order.

it cannot—or must not—be used for the benefit of humankind; rather, a belief in the sanctity of life requires that we accept our responsibility to have dominion over nature, as Holy Scripture teaches us.

In fact, we know from all of history and Christian teaching that man’s survival and thriving depend on exercising responsible dominion over creation, tilling and keeping the Garden, owning property and transforming it to the betterment of the human condition—always with an eye toward doing God’s will with the aim of salvation. Indeed, the 1965 Vatican document, *Gaudium et Spes*, also recognizes this fact, pointing out that modern man seeks to harness the “immense resources of the modern world” for his own good, and teaching that this end—the achievement of the good—can be fulfilled only in service of Christ, who strengthens and sustains us spiritually and makes possible our salvation—salvation that cannot be found through the immanence of the world’s resources but only through the transcendence of an incarnational faith. 

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is a Roman Catholic priest and president of the Acton Institute. This essay is adapted from an address given in Detroit, Michigan, on March 10, 1999.

... the experience of ages, profiting from every chance, has not been able to discover anything useful, which the penetrating foresight of the Creator did not first perceive and call into existence. Therefore, when you see the trees in our gardens, or those of the forest, those which love the water or the land, those which bear flowers, or those which do not flower, I should like to see you recognizing grandeur even in small objects, adding incessantly to your admiration of, and redoubling your love for the Creator.

—Saint Basil the Great—