Special Issue on the Environment

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# Private Property System Best Benefits Environment

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***R&L:*** *It has been said, borrowing Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic, that an economist is one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Assuming I place a high value on the environment, and knowing you are an economist about to talk about environmental issues, do I have reason to be ill at ease?*

**Hill:** Yes, you do. You have caricatured economists a bit, but economists have spent a great deal of time talking about the decision-making process while often ignoring the question of the origin of value, of what truly gives things value. I do think that economists are skilled at discussing how values get transferred, how they get altered, and how people recognize other people's values. But, ultimately, everyone has to think about the origin of those values.

I hope that, as a Christian economist, I am not completely insensitive to this issue, and my Christian theology certainly forms my position as an economist. In fact, I would argue that every economist has some sort of theology or view of the world that accounts for the origin of values. Because I am a believing Christian, my view is that value comes from God and is displayed in the universe he has created.

***R&L:*** *What does that mean in practice?*

**Hill:** It means that I try to establish an economic system that recognizes certain important theological facts. In other words, I think about institutions or the rules of the game or what some people call property rights, and I advocate a particular set of institutions based upon my theology.

***R&L:*** *In thinking about economic systems, which theological facts are the most important to consider?*

**Hill:** Two theological doctrines need to be considered. The first is that we bear the image of God, that we are morally responsible creatures who possess the potential to do creative things. Consequently, our institutional order should recognize that we can do all sorts of things to transform the world in ways that not only benefit others but also acknowledge God's ultimate ownership of the world. The second is that we are fallen, that we and all of our institutions and endeavors are marked by sin. Consequently, our institutional order should recognize that we are sinful and that our efforts are always imperfect. So my theology leads me to believe that we need an institutional order that allows for human creativity but acknowledges human sinfulness, and I regard a well-functioning private property order as the best system I can think of that reflects those two theological doctrines.

***R&L:*** *In what particular ways does private property take into account these two doctrines?*

**Hill:** Private property allows us to do things that benefit others—to take resources, combine them with other resources, and make the world better. What is more, private property actually encourages us to make the world better, because it gives us a great deal of freedom. The nice thing about the private property system is that you obtain resources not by simply taking them but, rather, by bidding for them or by offering better alternatives for them, which means that you must think that you have a better way to use them. And the private property system rewards you if you do, in fact, use those resources well, but it punishes you if you use them badly, so private property encourages the appropriate and creative use of resources. Further, private property allows for freedom in how resources are used. Some people will use them to build places of worship; others, to expand time with their families; still others, to create great works of art. Such creative impulses come from the fact that we are made in the image of God, and private property best allows for the free use of creative human action.

But private property also places limits on human actions, particularly on actions that physically invade someone else's property. If you drive your car over my lawn, if you burn my house down, if you build a factory that pollutes my water, then you are invading my physical space. And because of our private property system, I can take legal action against your actions. A well-functioning system of property rights recognizes not only that we can be creative but also that we can be counted on not to be creative all the time. In other words, since we are fallen, our actions need restraints, and such restraints are built into a system of private property.

***R&L:*** *You mention the freedom that private property allows for decision making. It would seem that such freedom also extends to allowing for minority opinions on how resources are used, whereas strictly political solutions often either yield unsatisfactory compromises or ignore minority opinions altogether. Is that accurate?*

**Hill:** Yes, it is. One of the good things about a private property system is that it allows people to go against the prevailing wisdom—and the prevailing wisdom is often wrong. People who disagree with the majority can go and buy some property and put it to better use. I have found some really interesting cases of such kinds of preservation. For example, in the 1930s Rosalie Edge preserved Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania when the prevailing wisdom counseled shooting all the raptors that flew by. Even the Audubon Society agreed with that. But Rosalie Edge disagreed, and, basically, she bought Hawk Mountain and preserved what is now the Hawk Mountain Preserve. If, in 1934, she had approached the Pennsylvania legislature for a political solution, she would have failed, because she represented a minority opinion.

A second thing is that the private property system allows for a great deal of what economists call time- and place-specific information. Private property decentralizes many decisions and encourages—and sometimes actually forces—the decision-making process to be carried out at a very local and personal level by people who are faced with actual situations. In contrast, politics tends to centralize those decisions and place them in the hands of people who do not have either the local information or the personal contact with the situation in question.

***R&L:*** *It would follow that the private property system's ability to accommodate minority opinions and to decentralize the decision-making process has significant implications for how power is distributed throughout a society. If true, this would be a great advantage, for as we know, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."*

**Hill:** That's correct. Another advantage of the private prop-


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erty system is that it fragments power. It does not distribute power perfectly, but when compared to the other alternatives, the market does have that significant advantage. We should consider this fact, because most of the injustices in the world occur because of the misuse of power. Christians, especially, need to consider this, because the Christian calling to be a voice for justice for the powerless is a very serious one. In contrast to some other Christian environmentalists, I would argue that the poor and powerless will do better in a regime of private property and markets than they will in a regime of heavy governmental intrusion.

***R&L:*** *When someone asked Brent Haglund, president of the Sand County Foundation, what he thought was the best tool for environmental conservation, he replied, "You know what I like? A deed in the courthouse." That is very persuasive. Private property solutions to environmental concerns are elegant and effective, but few people take advantage of them. Why is that?*

**Hill:** For one thing, just because private property solutions are superior does not mean that there are private property rights in place all of the time, particularly with regard to environmental protection. Sometimes when we look around and see environmental problems, our natural inclination is to say that we need to do something, and that something is governmental regulation. But there are several other things we can do.

One would be to try to remove the government's heavy hand from the situation, because sometimes the problems are caused by governmental intrusion, which prevents markets from working well and private property rights from actually developing.

In other cases, government has a role to play by providing means that lower the transaction costs of defining and enforcing property rights, by helping make property rights more effective. For instance, with regard to automobiles, I think that the government effectively defines property rights through the title registry system. If someone bangs into your car, and you see the license plate, you have a way of knowing who did it. So while I argue for minimizing government in some ways, in some other ways, I really like government. A title registry system that requires license plate numbers on automobiles and that records those numbers in a central location so that people can find out who owns what and can hold others accountable for their actions—such a system is a governmental assistance of private property.

***R&L:*** *How could such systems be applied to environmental concerns?*

**Hill:** We can move in the same direction in regard to pollutants by branding them with radio isotopes or tracer chemicals. People who use pesticides or herbicides could be required to brand the herbicide or pesticide they use with an identification number, which could be registered in a central directory, say, in the state of Wisconsin. In this way, you could identify the farmer who sprayed the herbicide that ended up polluting someone else's ground water and hold him accountable—just like the automobile registration system. Cases such as these are where I think we need intelligent and thoughtful governmental action to help define property rights.

***R&L:*** *Many Christians try to attain environmental stewardship goals through political intervention and governmental regulation. When do political means offer appropriate solutions to environmental issues?*

**Hill:** Governmental intervention is appropriate when people are not held accountable under the existing system of rules. I regard accountability as another aspect of Christian doctrine; we need to be held accountable for what we do. Sometimes property rights are deficient; in such cases, government needs to step in to improve accountability. In many cases, private property exists because government is present in the form of police forces and court systems, and those sorts of political systems are very useful.

*The poor and powerless will do better in a regime of private property and markets than they will in a regime of heavy governmental intrusion.*

*— Peter J. Hill*

***R&L:*** *When is politics not appropriate?*

**Hill:** The one caution I have, especially for Christians who are thinking about using politics to address environmental concerns, is that the Fall is a problem in the political sector as well as the market sector. It is clear that actions are marred

by sin in the marketplace, but sometimes we act as if that same sin problem does not also mar politics. Accordingly, we should not necessarily conclude that a problem in the marketplace can be solved simply by inviting governmental intervention or regulation. This is not to say that people in the political sector are more corrupt or more sinful than people in the private sector; however, it is certainly wrong to say that markets are sinister, while government is benign.

The real disadvantage of government is its monopoly on coercive force, which can be used (and used very badly) for taking property. So even if people in the market and people in politics are equally sinful, governmental use of coercive power provides the opportunities for that sinfulness to be used in some very inappropriate ways. So Christians ought to be very careful about saying unequivocally that political solutions will work. There are good theological and empirical reasons to believe that simply giving power to government and telling government to do good will not work.

*One of the good things about a private property system is that it allows people to go against the prevailing wisdom—and the prevailing wisdom is often wrong.*

***R&L:*** *What would be examples of inappropriate governmental intervention?*

**Hill:** Command-and-control techniques and heavy-duty regulations that attempt to impose regulatory solutions rather than to provide incentive-based solutions. The Endangered Species Act is a good example.

***R&L:*** *That was an act many Christians supported.*

**Hill:** That's right. Christians, basically, have claimed responsibility for the renewal of the Endangered Species Act. And I think they made a mistake in doing so.

***R&L:*** *Why?*

**Hill:** The Endangered Species Act has two big problems. The first is empirical: Does it work? There is considerable evidence that it does not work—at least not very well. This is why: If you discover that you own prime habitat for an endangered species, one of the things you will do is destroy the habitat, because if that endangered species does happen to show up, the government will intervene, and you will lose control of your property. There are very clear examples of people destroying habitat rather than running the risk of having endangered species appear.

***R&L:*** *What is an example of that?*

**Hill:** Red-cockaded woodpeckers. In the southeastern part of the United States, you do not want to let your piney woods get old, because old-growth pine forest is prime habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. So you speed up your harvest rotation and cut the trees every thirty to forty years rather than every sixty to seventy years to discourage red-cockaded woodpecker colonies from being established.

***R&L:*** *And what is the second problem that you see with the Endangered Species Act?*

**Hill:** The second problem concerns justice, which is something that should be especially important to Christians. Simply saying that you need to pay the cost of preserving an endangered species on your land on behalf of society is analogous to saying that I need to house the police in my front room because having a police force is good for society. But that is not how we finance the police; rather, we support them with tax funds. Endangered species preservation, if it is to be funded, should be funded the same way. I am appalled at how quickly Christians will say that something for the common good should be paid for by some particular individuals rather than by society as a whole. I would prefer that such things be done at the state or local level, but doing them at the federal level with general tax funds is preferable to telling particular individuals, "You are the unlucky person; the endangered species happens to be on your property, and since the rest of us want it preserved, you are going to bear the cost, not us." So the Endangered Species Act, with its focus on governmental intervention, places endangered species at greater risk and is unjust.

4***More on our Web site:*** *To read the conclusion of* Religion & Liberty's *interview with Peter J. Hill, please visit* www.acton.org/pjhill.html.

# The Earth Charter and the United Nations

*by Thomas Sieger Derr*

One of the more vigorously contested conflicts between private environmentalism and governmental policy has been occurring for a decade at the international level, where the Earth Charter movement is knocking at the door of the United Nations, begging for admission. It is a project of serious, determined, and sometimes zealous environmentalists. They intend their document, which has worked its way through several years of preparatory meetings, to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and eventually to achieve the enduring status of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. An ambitious project, it has drawn together in one crusade some wildly different characters, including formidable names like Mikhail Gorbachev and Maurice Strong. Gorbachev, having so dramatically fallen from his post as the second most powerful man in the world, and having failed in an attempt to come back as Russian president, has reinvented himself as a world environmentalist, founder and president of the non-governmental organization Green Cross International. Strong is a Canadian businessman, former executive director of the United Nations Environment Program (unep), and former secretary general both of the 1972 Stockholm Conference and the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. He is now president of the Costa Rica–based Earth Council, which, like Green Cross, is a major force behind the Earth Charter. Steven Rockefeller, professor of religion at Middlebury College, is perhaps the principal intellectual resource person for the movement.

**Fundamentally Incompatible Ideologies**

The Charter began as the project of a loose group of non-governmental organizations who hoped to use their accreditation to the 1992 un "Conference on Environment and Development" in Rio de Janeiro (the "Earth Summit") to get their document on the formal agenda and, if possible, adopted there. But that proved impossible, for reasons that will become evident below. After Rio, the sponsors, led by Strong and Gorbachev and some un personnel moving over to this now non-governmental cause, regrouped. They held workshops and consultations, formed themselves into an official Earth Charter Commission of twenty people, set up headquarters in Costa Rica, created a Web site with interactive possibilities, established links with other interested organizations, solicited input from different religious groups, and, in general, made every conceivable effort to broaden their base and justify their claim to be producing a "true People's Earth Charter."

It is a campaign, however, that is likely destined to fail of its stated aim, official un adoption of the Charter. At least it will be a tough sell. The first "Benchmark Draft" made it clear that there is a fundamental incompatibility of ideologies at work, and subsequent revisions have not removed the difficulties.

Throughout the long process of drafting and revising, Charter proponents sought to preserve a number of core values. Of course, the Charter was centered on sustainable living and conservation of nature—values, however, supported not just by pragmatic calculations but by some kind of "spiritual vision," conceived broadly enough to elicit support from many different religious traditions. It meant to communicate a sense of crisis and urgency, condemning the present forms of industrial society and calling for a radical change of course, a change that could come only from new values—or ancient values long lost and in need of rediscovery. It was thought that only religions had the power to effect such a change; hence, their support was deemed crucial. The intention was to produce something new, arresting, and inspiring—something that went beyond the practical cast of the twenty-five-year sequence of un reports.

In its earliest "benchmark" draft, in 1997, the Charter certainly was different. This text was plainly not very interested in matters of social justice, and certainly not in development. References to those issues were only incidental, added on, as some participants admitted, to please certain elements in the supporting coalition—a "Christmas tree" process where different people's projects and goals were hung on a statement about environmental policy, a bit like irrelevant riders on a piece of legislation. The tone, in sharp contrast to un documents, breathed a quasi-religious spirit, an overarching pantheism that not everyone could share. "The Earth itself is alive," it declared, echoing the Gaia hypothesis that earth is,

in effect, a single organism deserving of the name of a goddess—here, "Mother Earth," a name deliberately chosen for such symbolism. All creatures on earth have moral considerability—indeed, possibly even moral equality. We must live in solidarity not only with the rest of humanity but also with "the community of life." We must "respect Earth and all life" because "Earth, each life form, and all living beings possess intrinsic value and warrant respect independently of their utilitarian value to humanity." We must, therefore, practice non-violence not only toward other persons but also toward "other life forms and Earth." We must "treat all creatures with compassion and protect them from cruelty and wanton destruction." Our goal is to "grow into a family of cultures that allows the potential of all persons to unfold in harmony with the Earth Community," preserving "a deep sense of belonging to the universe."

This was simply not a declaration in the un mold. Throughout the whole course of its conferences and reports, from Stockholm to the "World Charter for Nature" to the World Commission on Environment and Development (the "Brundtland Commission"), to Rio, the un has been dominated by the developing nations, who intend to keep developing to dig themselves out of poverty. That is their primary concern, and no environmental document that even hints at rules that might impede development stands a chance of gaining official recognition. Suspicion of Western environmentalism leaps off the pages of the documents, the fear that ecological concerns will be used to keep the poorer nations in permanent subordination: environmentalism as neocolonialism. Virtually every environmental consideration is advanced in such a way that it allows the developing countries room to grow economically, even at some environmental cost. "Standards applied by some countries [read: the wealthy, developed ones] may be inappropriate and of unwarranted economic and social cost to other countries, in particular, developing countries" (Rio). The notion popular among some Western environmentalists that poorer nations should scale back their ambitions and preserve their simple ways is dismissed out of hand: "The idea that developing countries would do better to live within their limited means is a cruel illusion" (Brundtland Commission).

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The entire un program in these matters now flies under the banner of "sustainable development," a mantra-like slogan that succinctly puts the two foci, economic growth and environmental protection, in that order. The five-hundred-page heart of the Rio report, "Agenda 21," is essentially a massive development program into which environmental concerns have been integrated, sometimes awkwardly so. Environmental programs are to serve human needs, and that is their whole point. The un's view is, in short, firmly, resolutely, and uncompromisingly anthropocentric. Always, people first.

The contrast between the two viewpoints is particularly vivid on the matter of population growth. It is an article of faith among the Earth Charter group that the planet is overpopulated and is getting worse, and that serious efforts to limit our numbers are in order. Delegates from the developing parts of the world, again suspicious that the West wishes to curb their power, and convinced by recent un figures that birth rates are falling nearly everywhere anyway, regularly stymie efforts of the population controllers to write their anti-natalist opinions into un documents. Population limitation policies belong exclusively to the nation concerned, and only when they would enhance development. "Of all things in the world," said the Stockholm declaration, "people are the most precious." Even the Brundtland Commission, which at first glance seems to be an exception with its blunt language about unsustainable population growth, ends in a familiar un place: "Talking of population just as numbers glosses over an important point: People are also a creative resource, and this creativity is an asset societies must tap…. People are the ultimate resource." In short, anthropocentrism remains firmly in control here, too.

There are occasional lapses or exceptions to this focus in isolated sentences, which those who are sympathetic to the Earth Charter have sometimes lifted out of context as evidence of un support for their cause. These exceptions are really internal contradictions that get into the documents because this is committee writing, not Holy Writ; and every group wants its say, including the anti-anthropocentrists. These odd sentences—and that is all they are—are just inserted into sections whose main point always is to stress the

need to manage resources to meet the needs of a growing human population.

**Adjustments, But No Capitulation**

This first "Benchmark Draft" of the Earth Charter was not forged without inner disagreement, and the process had to be kept open for further discussion. In April of 1999 a new "Benchmark Draft II" appeared, correcting some, though not all, of the maladroit parts of the original. The development issue, for one, was rescued from obscurity. Now the principles of the Charter were all said to be "principles for sustainable development"; and although respect for earth and ecological integrity were placed first, a separate highlighted section—called "A Just and Sustainable Economic Order"—was created. Here, development was primary, with ecological concerns factored into the process. In this section, at least, the new version really did read like a un document.

Throughout the document were new phrases that seemed to honor the equal value of all humans, lest the incipient anti-humanism of the first draft prevail. We were now to affirm, echoing the language of un documents and especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "respect for the inherent dignity of every person." We must "secure the human rights of all women, men, and children." We were to "honor and defend the right of all persons, without discrimination, to an environment supportive of their dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being."

Gone, too, was the naive and wistful claim that social justice and sound ecology automatically reinforce each other. Instead the new document spoke more realistically of the need to "balance and harmonize" competing interests, including "economic progress with the flourishing of ecological systems." Whereas the first draft, in full crisis mode, declared that "we must reinvent industrial-technological civilization," this one commended sophisticated technology that is environmentally friendly. Smart, scientific ecology rather than pantheistic reverence dominated the section on "Ecological Integrity," again adopting the tone of the un documents.

Some unfortunate points were mercifully dropped. No longer was it necessary to point out that we are part of the universe. The reference to non-violence was separated from the context where it was to be directed at "other life forms" and scaled back to "practic[ing] nonviolence … to resolve conflict," although there did remain a suggestively malleable remark about "awakening to a new reverence for life." Other changes muted and qualified the ascription of independent value to nonhuman entities. "Mother Earth," despite her many fans, disappeared. Instead of the "Earth itself is alive," we had, "Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life." Care for the earth was placed firmly in the context of preserving human life, rather than standing alone as an independent value.

Last March, the "final" draft appeared, though a review even of that finality is promised in a couple of years. The changes are largely stylistic, and for the better. The alert eye will pick up both slight alterations that push the Charter still closer to the un concern with development and justice issues, as well as some corresponding toning down of vapid and vaguely spiritual exhortations—for example, the removal of the injunction to "seek wisdom and inner peace."

*Throughout there were new phrases which seemed to honor the equal value of all humans, lest the incipient anti-humanism of the first draft prevail.*

But these revisions have not entirely capitulated to un anthropocentrism. The prior language of "intrinsic value of all beings," an arguable point at best, is gone, but its replacement is its functional equivalent: "[E]very form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings." This is the point that the Charter's originators regard as indispensable and at the heart of the values shift that they advocate. We are enjoined to "declare our responsibility [not only] to one another, [but also] to the greater community of life." We humans have "kinship with all life" and need "humility regarding the human place in nature." We must "treat all living beings with respect and consideration." (It was "with compassion" in the 1999 draft.) Peace requires "right relationships" not only with other people but with "other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which we are a part." And we still must awaken to a "new reverence for life."

Nor has the tendency to add on irrelevancies been conquered. Stretching some rather tenuous connections to the main subject, there are calls for universal health care; education; disarmament; the "equitable distribution of wealth"; "eliminat[tion of] discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin"; participatory democracy; freedom of expression, assembly, and dissent; debt relief for developing nations; "gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development"; and the "participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social and cultural life as full and equal partners"

—gifts for just about everyone in a document that is ostensibly meant to focus our attention on the environment.

**Falling Short of a Universal Appeal**

The Earth Charter was meant by its proponents at Rio to be adopted by the un first in 1995; then it was postponed to 2000, even though there was always some pessimism and cynicism about its prospects. Now the hoped-for adoption has been put off until 2002—not as dramatic a time as the millennial year, though organizers have rescued some of the lost symbolism by noting that the new date is the tenth anniversary of Rio. Along with the time delay, which allows the campaign to work up support, the revisions in the last two drafts have probably increased the document's chances in the un, and the revision process is not over yet.

*There is also a kind of neo-paganism among many Charter supporters, whose antipathy to modern society has led them back to a radical pre-modernism.*

Still, the principal difficulty standing in the way of un adoption of the Charter remains a fundamental incompatibility of the general outlooks of the two sides. The un principles emphasize economic development; environmental management to serve human need; an embrace of science and technology to better human life; the sovereignty of independent nation states; and, gingerly, restraint on population growth where that would help, leaving the choices up to separate national policies. The Charter coalition, diverse as it is, may still be roughly summarized as anti-anthropocentric; ambivalent, at best, about further economic growth and pessimistic about the course of industrial civilization; skeptical of the value of science and technology and their ability to save us from ecological peril (except for the Internet, which they have passionately embraced); convinced of impending disaster, even in matters such as population growth, where recent evidence indicates otherwise, and angry at the un for not taking this "crisis" more seriously; in favor of an international control regime that will limit state sovereignty and even, perhaps, individual rights; and, somewhat paradoxically, in favor of "decentralized relatively self-reliant local economies," as the "people's Earth Declaration" produced by the International Non-Governmental Forum at Rio says.

There is also, undoubtedly, a kind of neo-paganism among many Charter supporters, whose antipathy to modern society in all its aspects, from industrial to religious, has led them back to a radical pre-modernism, a pan-religiousness that appears to be some (partly imagined) basic form of religious life before the destructive divisiveness of the historic religions appeared. Many supporters ascribe sentience, psychic and spiritual reality, to all things, not only to living creatures but also to natural entities like rivers, forests, ecosystems, even stars—a kind of mystic ecocentrism, one might say. All supporters, apparently without exception, attribute intrinsic value, even rights, to non-human entities.

These views have found their way into the actual Charter text at different stages, mostly in merely suggestive phrases; and many have been diluted to the vanishing point along the tortuous way to the current version. Although Charter drafters have made many changes that have moved their document closer to the un position, one must assume the compromises are grudgingly done, and only for tactical reasons. Changes made for the sake of gaining acceptability in governmental circles are likely to represent sacrifices of values held dear by the Charter movement, risking some loss of enthusiasm among its original supporters. There is obviously a certain point beyond which they are unwilling to go in currying official favor, a point beyond which, as they have bluntly said, they will not negotiate with the un but instead will "go it alone," promulgating their Charter without official backing.

What will happen? Each successive draft has been less offensive than the first. Perhaps some of the remaining oddities will be pared if the document is ever considered by the General Assembly for formal adoption. But maybe it will never get that far, and will instead be left standing alone as a non-governmental project, a "People's Earth Charter," as they call it, honored by those to whom it speaks meaningfully, ignored by the rest. It is hard, in any case, to imagine that it will ever achieve the status of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

If I were to guess—and that is all any outsider can do at this point—I would say that the language of intrinsic value that is still in the Charter, which grants nature some immunity from human need—language which, as noted, the Earth Charter Commission regards as essential and non-negotiable—will prove the final stumbling block to official acceptance. As long as the Charter talks that way, it will fall short of the universal appeal that would enable it to be adopted by the General Assembly.

***Thomas Sieger Derr, Ph.D.*** *is professor of religion at Smith College and the author of* Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism *(Abingdon Press). An earlier version of this essay appeared in the February 2000 issue of* First Things.

# Environmental Piety No Substitute for Technique

## *A Review Essay by Matthew Carolan*

In 1994, a group of evangelical Christian scholars, members of the Evangelical Environmental Network, circulated a document titled "An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation." The document's aim was to spur concern for environmental action on the part of evangelical Christians. *Care of Creation* renews the call for the greening of evangelicalism and presents a series of commentaries on that document by such notable theologians as Richard Bauckham, Calvin DeWitt, John Guillebaud, Jürgen Moltmann, Oliver O'Donovan, Ronald Sider, John Stott, and Loren Wilkenson. But of wider interest is whether these Christians can engage the larger environmental movement while persuading their fellow evangelicals to take on a heightened concern for the environment.

***The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action***
edited by R. J. Berry

InterVarsity Press
213 pp. Paper: $17.95

Certainly, as some authors such as Sider argue, Christians do not want to surrender the field of evangelism to environmentalists who would lead many to the "inadequate worldviews" of Matthew Fox's creation spirituality, Shirley MacLaine's "we are all gods" gospel, or Peter Singer's vision of man's moral equivalence with animals. (Not to mention, Stott notes, New Age or Eastern religions.) Involving oneself in the environmental movement, argue Sider and DeWitt, provides an opportunity to evangelize many lost souls.

However, Christians must have credibility on the matter, so they must first defend themselves from the charge—made most notably by historian Lynn White in his 1966 essay, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (reprinted in this book)—that Christianity is single-handedly responsible for the rape of nature. This, White argues, is because of Scriptures that encourage man to have dominion over nature and to subdue the Earth (Gen. 1:26–28).

Rebuttals to White, then, appear early and often in this book. Arguments such as White's misunderstand the notion of dominion, taking it out of context from all of Scripture in general and, specifically, from the notion of Christ's dominion, which is one of service, humility, and continued care. What is more, argues Bauckham, inadequate attention is paid to the role of the Renaissance and, particularly, to the interventions of Francis Bacon, whose program of dominating nature "became the ideology which inspired and governed scientific research and technological innovation down to the twentieth century." Although Bacon's goal was humanitarian, it was deeply flawed because it saw no value to nature outside of human needs. Also flowing out of the Enlightenment, according to Sider, are a "narcissistic individualism and materialistic naturalism."

These evangelicals, DeWitt notes, must also attempt to convince many of their co-religionists that joining the movement for care of creation will not lead to excessive worldliness (to the detriment of a focus on salvation), one-world government, the New Age, pantheism, political correctness, or a diminution of the importance of humans compared to animals, most notably in the promotion of abortion. (DeWitt and Guillebaud explicitly reject abortion in their essays.) Further, there is the problem of Christians who "come close to celebrating the demise of the Earth" as a portent of Christ's impending return.

### Striving to Worship the Lord of Creation

Before dealing with some of these issues and obstacles from within and without, we should give these Christian authors appropriate credit. They love a personal God and wish to affirm Scripture's claim that man alone is created in God's image. Indeed, such authors' reason for holding this position is in response to a 1992 World Council of Churches meeting in Seoul, South Korea, that explicitly sought to deny such a claim about man. But most importantly, many of the authors believe that the care of creation is required of Christians as a form of worship of the Creator and as a means of contributing to Christ's reconciliation of all things to himself (Col. 1:19–20).

To underscore this point, we need only reflect on our understanding of the Trinity. As elaborated most influentially by Moltmann, Christianity cuts a middle course between extreme notions of God's immanence and transcendence, hence avoiding the errors of eco-feminism and creation spirituality, on the one hand, and deism (or alternatively, according to Sider, Hindu monism and Platonism, which see "the material world as an evil or illusion to escape"), on the other.

Christ is the mysterious Word, or Logos, through whom all things were made and who dwells amidst creation. As Moltmann notes, quoting the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, "Cleave to the wood and I am there, lift up a stone and you will find me." Thinking about Christ this way leads us to a new "cosmic spirituality." Wilkenson chooses more orthodox sources to make a similar point, citing Ireneaus (Jesus "hung upon a tree, that he might sum up all things in Himself") and Athanasius (The Father effects "salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it at the first").

**Unsuitable and Incomplete Solutions**

Despite the many attempts by these authors to be faithful to the tradition, many scientific, theological, and anthropological questions are left unanswered. For example, are we certain that our Christian responses are responses to real problems? The original Declaration—as well as the essays that defend and comment on it—take completely for granted that there is a series of ongoing ecological crises involving "land degradation," "deforestation," "species extinction," "water degradation," "global toxification," "the alteration of the atmosphere," and "human and cultural degradation." Yet substantive argument on the facts of the environmental debate, which might also lead to clearer policy prescriptions, is completely lacking in these essays.

In terms of practical action, there are only a few hints at what should be done. O'Donovan, in one of the more critical essays, notes that these questions seem to be left open by the Declaration. As to a program of living, there seems to be little more than "celebration, care and study, as well as the personal virtues of 'humility, forbearance, self-restraint and frugality.'" On the policy level, we also have very few examples. One activist, Peter Harris, worked for legislation to preserve a Portuguese wetland. Moltmann endorses German animal-protection laws. And Susan Drake Emmerich sought to resolve conflicts between the watermen of Tangier Island, Maryland, and environmental activists who sought "stringent controls" on the Chesapeake Bay waterways. (Using techniques to find common language for dialogue, Emmerich recounts how this approach led to a reduction of hostilities, including confessions of guilt from the watermen about throwing cans overboard or keeping undersized crabs.)

And then there is Guillebaud, who calls for the "effective provision for voluntary birth-planning," which includes the distribution of artificial contraception, so as to prevent the "disaster of there being more people on Earth than can live in harmony with God's creation." This is love of neighbor, Guillebaud argues, "which certainly requires us to ensure that there are not so many future neighbors that the planet becomes uninhabitable."

This last "solution" is interesting and raises a number of issues. First, it is strange to love some undefined future neighbors by making sure other undefined future neighbors remain non-existent, so as not to press the limits of creation. (Are these latter non-existent neighbors less lovable?) But give the author credit—at least he is talking about love of neighbor. And is that not all that matters?

Actually, it is not, which is the primary weakness of this book. If one does not have sound science, economics, philosophical anthropology, or even philosophy of the legal system (which is, I would argue, a unique ecosystem crucial for human survival), one can go well off course.

*These Christian authors love a personal God and wish to affirm Scripture's claim that man alone is created in God's image.*

*— Matthew Carolan*

A number of our authors wish to emphasize the value that creation has in itself, before God. They cite the Book of Job in doing so. And yet what is the appropriate response to such value? Certainly not dominion in the dominating sense, the authors would argue. That would be the "consumerism," the "greed," and the "selfishness" of the free-market "ideology" that is repeatedly denounced in the book. Well, then what?

Bauckham provides a clue as to the tensions in what the Declaration proposes and what many of these authors profess to do when he criticizes the Declaration's notion of stewardship of nature as "too freighted with the baggage of the

modern project of the technological domination of nature." Stewardship still suggests an unfortunate "vertical" relationship between man and "the rest of creation." The Book of Job, says Bauckham, teaches man "his place as one creature among others in a creation for which he is not the be-all and end-all." Furthermore, "in the praise in which we gratefully confess ourselves creatures of God, there is no place for hierarchy."

**It Is Too Simple to Appeal to Simpler Times**

Yet only Moltmann, whose theology is cited so approvingly by so many of these authors, dares to follow the logic of such a theology to its conclusion—namely, that nature has "rights" against man. Nature should be protected—through amendments to all national constitutions—"for its own sake." We should "beg forgiveness for the injustice we have inflicted on the earth." Nature "warrants respect regardless of its worth to man."

But who decides what "respect" for, or "injustice" against nature—a nature that exists "for its own sake" and with its own "rights"—means? For all their reliance on the Book of Genesis and the Book of Job, these authors need to recall the Hebrew Scriptural passages where God gives Moses the Law, and, hence, gives "rights" specifically to man. Rights give men equality with each other, and, hence, freedom. Man's rights (to life, to property, and the like), as articulated in the Ten Commandments, reflect his unique dignity before God, and mirror God's Trinitarian glory. They join man into one community, while distinguishing him from each of his fellow men. Grant "rights" to nature, and some men—namely, the judges over man and nature—become more equal than others. You will not restore a "horizontal" relationship between creatures, as Bauckham might say, but instead make nature even more "vertical" than before—with man perhaps even taking the place of God. Is it any wonder, then, that some evangelicals suspect the environmental movement? They see problems from which some of our theologians here avert their gaze.

O'Donovan makes another observation worth noting. He points out that it is "impossible" for the Declaration to say much about "the new philosophies of history which looked for a story of progress won by human mastery and manipulation," because "there is too much to be said." Rather, the Declaration "wisely" attributes the problems to a "spiritual crisis."

Well, perhaps such an attribution is wise, since a spiritual crisis is not the same thing as an intellectual error. But perhaps it is also foolish. Only to mention the Enlightenment is to ignore its organic connection with the salvation history that has, by God's plan, run right through it. Christians have lived through, been influenced by, and influenced the Enlightenment. And they continue to be influenced by it now. Simply distancing oneself from the Enlightenment by blaming it for pollution, greed, and consumerism will not do. Bauckham gives Bacon credit for the humanitarian motivation of his project, but he does not say specifically which parts of it should be reversed. Do Christians swear off all biotechnology and genetic engineering, or merely some of it? And on what grounds do we decide?

O'Donovan also points out a certain "failure of nerve" in the Declaration in speaking about "that highest work of God's creation, that supreme object of the divine compassion, that elect partner of God's divinity in the person of Christ," which "suggests a failure of nerve about the meaning of the incarnation itself." Indeed. It is too simple to say that Christ lived in simpler times. He shared the same life we find ourselves in now. He was born into a legally sophisticated empire that allowed considerable freedom. He was the son of a carpenter, and made his living—and died—on the products of the tree. How does the example of Christ, the Lord of nature, illuminate our relationship to nature?

*If one does not have sound science, economics, philosophical anthropology, or even philosophy of the legal system, one can go well off course.*

Sadly, the answers to such a question are not forthcoming in this book.

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# Tempted by Affluence?

## *A Review Essay by Samuel Gregg*

"Buying stuff is not just our popular culture, it is how we understand the world." One wonders, of course, exactly who James Twitchell (author of *Lead Us into Temptation*) thinks this "we" is. It is true, nonetheless, that of all the issues that provoke the most debate about the free economy, the question of the culture of consumerism invariably ignites heated debate. Do the plethora and variety of material goods that are the fruit of a dynamic entrepreneurial economy invariably lead us astray from the higher things in life? Or could it be that we are missing something—that the culture of consumerism, in fact, contains much that we should celebrate rather than denigrate?

Twitchell, who teaches English and advertising at the University of Florida, suggests that one should be careful about disparaging consumerism. Indeed, his book, with its careful study of the language and iconography of modern consumerism and advertising, portrays the never-ending process of buying and selling material goods as something that is, in itself, deeply meaningful. In fact, if all Twitchell's claims are true, one would wonder why humans would bother to do anything else but constantly substitute their material possessions for more modern, faster, more colorful objects.

In one sense, Twitchell's book functions as a necessary corrective to those texts that portray modern consumerism as little more than a necessary evil or, more worryingly, as reflective of a deep decline in Western culture. Bringing together expertise in advertising and literary studies, Twitchell begins by explaining his theory of the origins of modern commercialism during which he disposes—quite effectively—of the interpretations offered not only by feminist ideology but also by the contemporary cultural studies movement, especially that pioneered by the neo-Marxist Frankfurt school. The accusations of manipulation (either of the "patriarchal" or "class" variety) associated with these ideologies cannot, in Twitchell's view, explain the avidness with which so many people in contemporary Western societies, regardless of gender or class, have embraced modern commercialism.

Instead, commercialism and consumerism are, according to Twitchell, reflective of deeper yearnings within human beings. He speaks, for example, of how contemporary advertising and commercialism have embraced "the rhetoric of salvation," by which he seems to mean that consumerism encourages us to imagine ourselves as more than what we are. Here he draws an interesting parallel between the church—specifically, the Roman Catholic Church—and the language and imagery of contemporary consumerism. Modern commercialism has embraced ritual, imagery, and symbol in a way reminiscent of the medieval church. The ability of manufacturers and entrepreneurs to clothe messages about humanity in such garb caters, Twitchell suggests, to deeply felt human needs for the sacred in life.

***Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism***
by James B. Twitchell

Columbia University Press
310 pp. Paper: $14.95

### Partly Confused

Continuing this religious theme, Twitchell examines some of the criticisms of consumerism commonly articulated by leaders and members of Protestant and Catholic communities alike. Here, however, he appears to be somewhat out of his depth. Twitchell states, for example, that "at the heart of Christian orthodoxy is a fierce condemnation of the material world," and he then proceeds to outline why this is the case, by way of somewhat selective quotation of Scripture. The attitude that Twitchell describes is actually characteristic of the oldest Christian heresy: Gnosticism. The Gnostics viewed the things of this world and working with such things as irredeemably evil and corrupting. Orthodox Christians have found themselves repeatedly battling this error throughout the ages.

Certainly, there are innumerable warnings in Scripture against the dangers of overrating wealth in comparison to the moral and spiritual goods that more closely reflect our dignity in God's image, but Twitchell appears unaware of

the numerous Scriptural verses that affirm the essential goodness of the material world. For example, in Genesis (the description of God's creative act in which, among other things, he creates the heavens, the waters, and the animals), we read the words "God saw that it was good" six times, and upon the creation of humanity, the whole is pronounced to be "very good." In this way, Christians are simply asked by God to keep the material world in the proper perspective.

A similar vision of material things pervades the New Testament. Christ warned the prosperous people of his time of the spiritual and morals dangers associated with prosperity. "A man's life," he said, "does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). This, however, is accompanied by messages that encourage the proper management of resources, as evidenced by the parables of the talents, the pounds, and the unjust steward. Private property is simply taken for granted in these parables, and the resourcefulness of those who increase their wealth by honest means is applauded. Nowhere in the Gospels, in Acts, or in the Apostolic Letters is the material world derided or viewed as intrinsically evil. Instead, we see that material things do have a role to play in the salvation of humanity insofar as our use of them can reflect our acceptance or rejection of the Good News and its associated call to live in truth.

Essentially, the word *consumerism* can be employed two ways. One is to describe the process by which people make decisions to buy material goods. Such goods range from those that meet people's most basic needs to those that reflect people's capacity to choose which goods they wish to spend their income on, once basic needs have been met. Christians have nothing to fear from this type of consumerism; it simply reflects the material dimension of human existence.

The other definition of consumerism, however, is one that should concern Christians. It involves viewing the material dimension of life as the whole point of human existence. Consumerism, in this sense, involves the inversion of the priority of being over having—that is, we consider the pursuit of material goods as more important than our need to acquire those moral and spiritual goods—the virtues—that reflect our unique ability as humans to transcend what we are and to make ourselves into the person-that-we-ought-to-be. When used to describe this problem, consumerism is essentially a synonym for the type of materialism against which Christians have been warned by Christ to guard themselves. Unfortunately, this distinction does not appear in Twitchell's book, despite the fact that the author is clearly seeking to place the nature of consumerism in a deeper and wider intellectual framework than is usual for studies of modern commercial activity.

Twitchell is, however, on firmer ground when he focuses upon the empirical dimension of modern commercialism. He notes, for example, that objects once regarded as luxuries (such as computers and cars) are now essentials; yet, paradoxically, the price of such goods has steadily dropped over time. This reminds us that one of the benefits of the free economy is the constant raising of living standards for *everyone*—a point sometimes neglected by some religious leaders. He also underlines the hypocrisy of wealthy urban dwellers who bewail the materialism of others while simultaneously failing to recognize the extent to which it has permeated their own existence.

**Slightly Manic**

In the final analysis, this book performs a valuable service insofar as it encourages us to rethink the meaning of modern commercialism and to refrain from judging it too hastily or harshly. Unfortunately, it is somewhat marred by the author's tendency to make unsubstantiated assertions. Twitchell claims, for example, that modern commercialism has replaced religion. This may be true of certain parts of the West, but it is more questionable when applied to the rest of the world. One suspects that this mixture of attention to detail and unproven assertions stems from the slightly manic, pop-culture tone that pervades much of the book. Whatever its merits, such writing is not always conducive to the art of careful and consistent analysis.

*Material things do have a role to play in the salvation of humanity insofar as our use of them can reflect our acceptance or rejection of the Good News.*

*— Samuel Gregg*

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# Book News

**Walking**
*Henry David Thoreau*
*Applewood Books*
*60 pp. Paperback: $6.95*

"I have met," begins Thoreau, "with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is of taking walks,—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*." His choice of this word, *sauntering*, is intentional and earnest; the word itself is derived, he explains, "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *a la Sainte Terre*, to the Holy Land." In time, such pseudo-pilgrims came to be called *Sainte-Terrers*, or Holy-Landers, and Thoreau insists that any walker worth his salt sets forth in such a frame of mind. "Every walk is a sort of crusade," he writes, "preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels."

But of what Holy Land does Thoreau speak, and of which infidels? Stated simply, the Holy Land to which Thoreau would have us make pilgrimage is wild nature; indeed, "in Wilderness is the preservation of the World." The infidels are "man and his affairs, church and state and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture, even politics, the most alarming of them all"—in short, civilization and all its trappings. Thus, for Thoreau, man's chief disease is civilization; his prime remedy, wilderness. To stay sane and free, then, we saunter.

Thoreau's passionate and poetic defense of things wild has made him the patron of outdoorsy folks. While such a response is understandable, it ultimately oversimplifies the prophet of simplicity's real intellectual project. When Thoreau speaks of nature and wilderness, he is not doing so scientifically or aesthetically but metaphysically. In truth, some of our present confusion about what nature is and how we ought to relate to it is due to Thoreau's belief that nature is, for those who are attentive, a means to truth.

This reinterpretation can be seen clearly in this essay's discussion of literature. "In Literature," Thoreau writes, "it is only the wild that attracts us." Further, since literature is a product of civilization, Thoreau cannot find "any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild," though mythology, which flashes with "pristine vigor," comes close. Here are many of the hallmarks of American Transcendentalism's particular adaptation of classic Romantic categories. Nature and degenerate civilization are radically opposed, and in all matters, the key is to return to a more primitive—and, hence, more pristine—state. In this way, the truth about who we are and what we are to be about is to be found in, with, and through nature.

Much that Thoreau says in this excellent essay is true (it is good to have wild spaces and to go out and tramp about in them), and he says it in fine turns of phrase. But the kernel of his thought—this radical disjunction between nature and civilization—is false and dangerous. The whole world is our home, field and village no less than woods and meadow. And insofar as civilization is the expected consequence of our human nature, civilization is (counterintuitive though it may be to say so) one of the most natural things in the world. As G. K. Chesterton rightly observed, "The silk hat upon the head of the English stockbroker is not unnatural; it is merely one of the darkest and weirdest of the processes of nature," for "the whole of our civilization is the legitimate outcome of our desires and instincts of improvement."

Early in his essay Thoreau notes but rejects an alternative derivation of *sauntering*: "*sans terre*, without land or home." But, alas, by insisting on such a radical divorce of nature and civilization, by disparaging civilization as bondage, and by placing too much metaphysical freight on things wild, Thoreau truly and finally makes us homeless. At ease neither in the wild nor in the city, and finding all the world strange and unfitting, we discover we have no place to abide, and so become pilgrims indeed.

**The Holy Earth**
*Liberty Hyde Bailey*
*Cornell University Press*
*171 pp. Paperback: $6.30*

First published in 1915, this foundational conservation document outlines Bailey's theoretical grounds and practical proposals for environmental preservation. His is a particularly Judeo-Christian stance, beginning with the Book of Genesis and emphasizing the original goodness of the Creation, its subsequent fall, and man's calling to be a responsible steward of its resources. While his specific policy proposals may rely too heavily and too naively on direct governmental intervention to advance environmental ends, Bailey's theological insights enable him to avoid the twin errors of denigrating man and deifying nature while still advocating wisdom and prudence in our dealings with the earth.

**—Gregory Dunn**

# Receiving the Gift of Stewardship

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

The starting point for any authentic discussion of environmental stewardship must begin with the witness of the Book of Genesis: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:27–28).

In our times, however, this biblical vision of the relationship between God, man, and nature has been confused by the introduction of two virulent strains of materialism. The first strain proposes that the natural world is the source of all value, that man is an intruder to the ecosystem, and that God, if he exists at all, is so immanent in the natural order that he ceases to be distinguishable from it. Such a view might be described as neo-pantheism. The second strain proposes that man is the source of all values, that the natural order is merely instrumental to his aims, and that God, if he exists at all, is irrelevant. Such a view bespeaks a latent deism.

Genesis presents a radically different picture of how the world is put together. In this account, God is the source of all values—in truth, he is the source of everything, calling the world into being out of nothing by his efficacious word. Man is part of this order essentially and, what is more, by the virtue of his created nature, he is placed at the head of creation as its steward. Yet this stewardship can never be arbitrary or anthropocentric, for the biblical cosmology implies that man rules creation in God's stead and must do so according to his divine will. Sound stewardship of God's creation is founded upon an important recognition: There exists a hierarchy of being necessitating that man approach the things of this earth in a manner according to their true value. This value is determined by the degree to which each created thing participates in the perfection of God. Thus, the more that a creature can participate in the life of God, the greater its ontological value. This is why God places man, who is a rational being capable of freedom and love, as the pinnacle of his created order: Man images God's perfection in a more excellent way than other creatures. One might say that all the beings of God's creation find their perfection in the constitution of human nature.

*Nature must finally be seen in relation to the moral value of the human person.*

Man's stewardship does not establish a license for him to destroy creation. Certainly, nature has objective value distinct from its relation to man. Nature therefore deserves our respect but not our worship, and nature must finally be seen in relation to the moral value of the human person who has the responsibility of stewardship.

Our view of stewardship must be rooted in the authority of divine revelation and informed by intelligent reflection on creation, reflection that has been passed down to us by tradition. Such a view marvels at how creation has been elevated to a higher perfection by the creative hand of human intelligence. It is a view that sees, in the incarnation of Christ, God's radical affirmation of all that is truly human because man images his Creator. The gift of stewardship, though not always ordered to the greatest good in practice, yet displays the human being's central role in the drama of creation.

***Rev. Robert A. Sirico*** *is a Roman Catholic priest and the president of the Acton Institute. This essay is adapted from his opening remarks at "A Proper Christian Approach to the Environment," a debate with Matthew Fox conducted on May 3, 2000, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

“Properly speaking, of course, there is no such thing as a return to nature, because there is no such thing as a departure from it.The phrase reminds one of the slightly intoxicated gentleman who gets up in his own dining room and declares firmly that he must be getting home.”

—G. K. Chesterton—