

ecospirit

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One cannot suppose that eco-sophia, as a true wisdom, can develop historically in a vacuum among an elite group of gnostics. Ecosophy is as much a hope as a reality; as much a project as a platform; as much a way of life as a set of ideas. The wisdom of dwelling in the land and living harmoniously with the Earth must be concretely realized in each bioregion with its peculiar cultural and religious traditions--most of great antiquity. An effort to establish an ecosophical way of life for communities as well as individuals can scarcely do without the moral and spiritual resources present within these traditions.

Perhaps in the enthusiasm to establish a "new" biocentric vision some individuals prematurely dismissed the western religious traditions as hopelessly anthropocentric. A closer investigation, however, has shown that the situation is not that simple. While these traditions may have been used to justify an exploitive attitude toward the Earth, they, nevertheless, contain doctrines, insights, values and symbols that can serve a more ecologically-sound perspective.

Concern for the Earth dictates that we use a more Buddhist-like practice of "skillful-means" (upaya) in presenting an ecosophical orientation. Such a skill requires both an empathetic understanding of another's worldview and the ability to shape one's own presentation in such a way as to gently guide them in the direction of new insights.

Christian scholars and theologians are the ones best suited to understand their tradition from within, to draw upon and develop its more creation-centered potentials and so to enable Christians to adopt a more ecocentric view. In this issue we feature articles on Christian Theology and Ecology by two founding members of the Institute, Bill Falla and Roger Timm. Both individuals are theologians and ordained ministers actively engaged in leading their communities toward a more creation-centered Christianity.

Don St. John

The Institute of Ecosophical Studies is an educational non-profit organization located at but independent from Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA.

THEOLOGY, SCIENCE AND
A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC
by William S. Falla, Jr.

What has been the response of Christian theology to ecological issues and concerns? Can Christian theology provide us with insights and strategies for dealing with current ecological dilemmas? Do those theologies which utilize a synthesis of Christian theology and natural science give one a quantitative advantage for dealing with ecological issues? What shape should theology take to effectively deal with ecological problems? These questions will guide this brief study because they lead us to the critical issues involved in any discussion of theology and ecology.

Historically, most theological reflection has been strongly rooted in scripture. But, as Richard Hiers points out, "ecology was not a topic within range of vision in biblical times."¹ Thus, the nature of biblical witness with respect to the environment requires further theological reflection if one is to produce a substantial and coherent ecological teaching. The basic problem with the available biblical material is threefold: it is spotty in quality, contradictory in content and scarce in quantity, especially in the New Testament. This last factor has been exacerbated by the preference of the Christian faith for the New Testament over the Old Testament with the concomitant devaluing of the latter.

While some of Christianity's lack of environmental and ecological concerns may be traced to it's biblical heritage, that alone is not sufficient to account for the paucity of theological reflection. Historically, Christian theology has ignored questions centering on the care of creation because ecology and the environment have simply been non-issues. There were no compelling environmental needs which Christian theology felt warranted major attention. It must be remembered that it has only been within the last few decades that ecological concerns have become important to the world, much less the Church. Hence, other issues absorbed the attention of theologians.

Doctrinally, the primary theological categories that Christian thinkers have focused on have not in general been appropriate for stimulating ecological discussions. While most Christian theologians

have developed a doctrine of creation, almost all of these have been dependent on and subordinate to other doctrines, such as salvation, redemption and humanity. As a result, few creation-centered theologies have emerged in Christianity.

This pushing of the doctrine of creation to the periphery of Christian thought has been deleterious to the treatment of the environment in several ways. First, the fact that the doctrine of creation serves other doctrines can lead to an instrumental view of creation itself. Hence, creation is merely a means for effecting the more crucial concerns of God or a backdrop to the great drama of redemption. The redemption doctrine, by theologically judging creation flawed and inadequate, opens the door to the historical denigration of creation.

Second, the redemption paradigm has been reinforced by a strong strain of Platonic metaphysics which has led Christians to view the world as inauthentic if not evil. Combined with a powerful "other-worldly" eschatology, this has provided the Christian theologian with a paradigm within which it is easy to ignore or deny the value of the created order.

Third, this notion of creation is reinforced by a view of humanity as suspended between God and the rest of the created order. Thus, the human being who may be "a little less than God," is nevertheless a lot better than the rest of creation. While this may not lead to exploitation per se, it does create a hierarchy in which the role of the lesser is to serve the needs of the greater. In any case, it certainly does not provide a paradigm that is conducive to discussions on environmental issues.

The question now to be asked is this: must it be this way? If not, then what sort of corrective actions might be taken? To the first question, we must answer, "No!" In responding to the second, one can choose several options. The option that I wish to choose is the one offered by the molding of natural science with Christian theology. Such theologians as Ralph Wendall Burhoe, Arthur Peacocke and John Bowker have attempted such a synthesis. Let us look briefly at this synthesis and its relevance for ecological issues.

It must first be noted that science in its own way has proven as ineffective in dealing with basic ecological questions. This

ineffectiveness is in large part due to science's traditional insistence that it is an amoral discipline and that nature is an object to be studied. The result has been an instrumental view of nature not unlike that of Christian theology. This is not, however, to close the door to the possibility that either one, independently, could change in such a way as to produce an effective environmental paradigm. Yet it is to suggest that a synthesis of natural science and Christian theology provides a better possibility for the development of a Christian environmental/ecological ethic.

Before showing why this is so, it is necessary to clarify our use of the term ethic. E.O. Wilson defines an ethic as a "set of rules invented to meet circumstances so new and intricate, or else encompassing responses so far in the future that the average person cannot foresee the final outcome."² Thus an ethic implies a stable foundation of precepts and attitudes out of which environmental or ecological decisions can be made. This paradigm is stable but not static and can be significantly modified and informed by the dynamism of the natural order. Thus it weds the essential or foundational with the experiential.

In my opinion, this ethic, or paradigm, is best constructed by an open dialogical interaction between science and religion--an interaction where both science and theology make contributions of a foundational and experiential nature. While many may argue for a bifurcation of task with science and theology concentrating on their "particular area of expertise,"³ it can be shown that this strategy has, in fact played a major role in the current crisis in environmental ethics. On the one hand, scientific theories provide insights of a foundational, or paradigmatic, nature as well as means of organizing and reporting data. On the other hand, theology provides us with a means of reporting and organizing information as well as giving us a cosmological framework in which to operate. For example, Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory provides foundational insights into the operation of the cosmos in addition to a way of discussing species variation and development. Likewise, the Christian doctrine of creation tells us something about the universe as well as providing a worldview.

If the best ethic is developed from an interdisciplinary synthesis, does the synthesis between science and Christian theology provide the optimal ethic/paradigm? Could a synthesis between other disciplines be equally as effective? I would maintain that the disciplines of science and theology best provide the elements needed for an effective ethic because: a) each focuses on the operation of the cosmos at all levels, b) each does so in an attempt to understand the universals by which the cosmos operates, and c) each expands the view of the other because of differences in their approach and focus.

What shape then will this new ethic take? On a broad conceptual level it would integrate current scientific theories (Big Bang, Neo-Darwinian evolution, 2nd Law of Thermodynamics etc.) with major theological categories (Creation, Christ, Humanity, Eschatology, etc.). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to completely detail this intergration, one can get an idea of its nature by looking at some of its characteristics.

First, the ethic would be creation-centered. In other words, the creation of the cosmos and the understanding of that creation must be at the center of the paradigm and define all other concepts and categories. It is obvious that science with its focus on the natural order does much to enhance the creation-centeredness. It does so by defining questions, providing an understanding of processes and events, and developing a modus operandi. But, beyond this, science provides an evolutionary paradigm of creation. Theology in making creation its central doctrine must do so in a manner that is compatible with this evolutionary worldview, i.e., of a creation that is constantly active and ongoing. Furthermore, the creation doctrine must define other doctrines as well. One, therefore, arrives at a doctrine of Christ in which Jesus Christ is continuously active in the ongoing processes of the cosmos. While such a Christology is uncommon, it can be found in Col 1:15-20 and in those theologies which contain the idea of creation continua, such as Irenaeus and Teilhard de Chardin. Such a Christology imparts a degree of sanctity to the universe now understood as a place where God/Christ is active in an ongoing manner. Therefore, when one interacts with this cosmos, one is, in a sense, interacting with God and Jesus Christ. The individual is thus provided with an

understanding of the cosmos, with strategies for responsible interaction, and with a motivation for that interaction.

Second, this heightened view of creation implies a more modest view of humanity. This does not mean that humanity has less value but that humanity has no more value than the rest of creation. The incorporation of this view of the human presents a major challenge to Christian theology. Historically, the church has been reluctant to adopt this view, resisting both Darwinian evolutionary theory and later the Neo-Darwinian model for their suggestions that the human was no different from any other species in its development as a species.

Even those theologians who have a creation-centered theology maintain an exalted view of humanity, (with the possible exception of Francis). For example, Meister Eckhardt, in the collection of his sermons entitled Creation Spirituality has one sermon entitled "How all Creatures Share an Equality of Being" followed immediately by one entitled "The Greatness of the Human Person." In this latter sermon, Matthew Fox points out that Eckhardt argues that "Humanity, . . ., is the Creator's masterpiece, a likeness of the divinity that has no parallel."⁴ This leaves us, then, with an Orwellian-like system in which all creatures are equal but humans are more equal.

Some argue that a doctrine of humanity could be designed which translates privilege into responsibility. But this stewardship model has not and will not work to protect the environment because privilege is generally translated into rights. Thus, humanity, as a result of its position, has a right to use the universe in any way it sees fit. Even responsible use is use for humanity's benefit. A truly meaningful environmental ethic will arise only when a use pattern is developed in which all creation has equal privilege. This can be facilitated within Christianity by a less-exalted doctrine of humanity.

Finally, a less other-worldly eschatology is needed within Christian theology if a viable environmental ethic is to be developed. The "play now, pay later" attitude, when coupled with the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, has traditionally produced little sense of urgency or necessity. Even evangelical eschatology which does produce a sense of urgency and upheaval does

so in an other-worldly manner. In a this-worldly eschatology "eternal" judgment occurs here and all successive generations must endure it. This is precisely what science is telling us about humanity's treatment of the cosmos. Our actions are so disturbing the environment that the results will serve as an "eternal" judgment of humanity. If for example, we poison the environment in an irreversible manner, that poisoning becomes not only an "eternal" judgment of humanity but something that creation must endure. In short, Christian theology must couch our actions in apocalyptic terms so that we come to grips with the gravity of our actions and need for an urgent response. Christian eschatology must recapture the immediacy felt by Paul and the early Church but it must do so in such a way that it remains anchored in the world of everyday experience.

This paper has been only a beginning in the exploration of a possible synthesis between science and Christian theology in the interest of an environmental ethic. I have merely tried to suggest some steps in a direction which will be beneficial for both and for creation itself.

NOTES

1. Richard Heirs. Zygon, March 1986, p. 45.
2. Wilson, E.O. (1984). Biophilia. Harvard Univ. Press, p. 120.
3. This so-called "two book theory" would have science deal exclusively with the physical world in as an empirical a manner as possible while theology would concentrate on metaphysical considerations.
4. Fox, Matthew. (1980). Breakthrough: Meister Eckhardt's Creation Spirituality. Doubleday & Co., p. 107.

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ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

by Roger Timm

There are those who would find the combination of terms in this title, "ecological," "theology," and "the Bible," to be hopelessly contradictory or incompatible. There are those who believe that the Bible and theology based on it are anything but ecologically sound, or even ecologically-minded. They would share the position described by Lynn White, Jr., in his classic article, "The Historical Roots of the Ecologic Crisis" (White, 1967), that Biblical creation theology has served instead to undermine ecological concerns and to support exploitation and abuse of the earth and its resources. The Biblical command from Genesis 1 that humans are to subdue the earth and have dominion over it has been used to justify a whole host of ways of depleting the earth's resources, of polluting air and water, and of endangering the continued existence of various parts of creation.

In fairness it should be noted that the previous position does not reflect White's position accurately. He does not argue that the Bible in actuality does affirm such an exploitative approach to the earth; rather he argues that the Bible has in fact been interpreted to support such an approach. Furthermore, White argues that an interpretation of the command to exercise dominion in Genesis 1 that allows for exploitation of the earth and its resources has developed primarily from Latin Christianity, beginning already in the Middle Ages. White suggests that the way out of our ecological crisis is to undergo a spiritual conversation and recommends St. Francis of Assisi as a model of harmonious and respectful living with nature for this conversion.

While White's article has been subjected to some well-deserved criticism (see, for example, Derr, 1975, and Berry, 1979), his main point is surely beyond reproach: Western Christians have used the creation account in Genesis 1 to support their abuse of the environment. Has this use of Genesis, however, been a legitimate one? Basically, the answer to this question is "No."

To support this claim it is important to examine the main theological points of the Biblical creation accounts. I refer to the "Biblical creation accounts" purposely, for there is more than one creation account in the

Bible. Most Biblical scholars agree that there are two separate creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, and there is increasing recognition that the Bible's creation theology is expressed in passages other than those of Genesis 1 and 2. Bernhard Anderson, for example, has argued that in the Hebrew Scriptures there are four strata of creation theology: the pre-monarchic level where creation is seen in the Exodus event as the creation of the human community of the people of Israel; the monarchic level where creation is seen as the creation of social order, which is represented in the Davidic monarchy -- reflected in Genesis 2; the level of Wisdom literature where creation is seen as the expression of God's majesty and wisdom, apart from historical events; and the priestly level where creation is seen as the inauguration of a series of covenants -- reflected in Genesis 1 (Anderson, 1984).

In the first stratum of Biblical creation theology little distinction is made between God the Creator and God the Liberator of the people of Israel; in fact God is seen as displaying the power of the Creator in creating the community of Israel in the Exodus. In the "Song of Moses" in Exodus 15 God's power over the waters of the Sea of Reeds is described in language reminiscent of the view of God's power over the waters of the primordial deep in Israel's creation accounts. In "The Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32 God is praised for the Exodus with words that depict God as Creator -- interestingly enough with imagery describing God as both father and mother. Psalm 77, 16-20, explicitly connects an ancient hymn of creation with a reference to God leading God's people "like a flock" by the hands of Moses and Aaron. Similarly, if somewhat anachronistically, Second Isaiah uses language of creation to depict how God will re-do the Exodus once again by returning the people of Israel to their homeland from their exile in Babylon.

Given the scheme of different levels of creation theology described above, the narrative in Genesis 2 represents a level that precedes that in Genesis 1. While the story undergirds the hierarchical social structure of the Davidic monarchy (God over Adam and Eve who were over the garden just as God was over the king who was over the people of Israel), the narrative does suggest a relationship with the environment that is less exploitative than

the view in Genesis 1. Adam clearly is given power over the animals by being assigned the task of naming them, but the responsibility Adam and Eve have to tend the garden suggests a caring and nurturing relationship with the earth. They were to till the garden so that it would thrive and flourish; abusing the earth would jeopardize the well-being of the garden and contradict their God-given charge to keep the garden.

The third stratum is the level of Wisdom literature. The most representative passages of this level are probably Job 38-41 and Psalm 104. The creation event is viewed here as an universal, cosmological event, not one tied in with some particular historical event in the life of one certain people, Israel. Moreover, creation is seen as the expression of God's wisdom; creation demonstrates the transcendent power and majesty of God and no mere mortal ought have the audacity to challenge God. It is in this level of the Biblical creation accounts that we see most clearly the remnants of the mythological view of creation as the result of a primordial cosmic battle between God and the forces of chaos, usually manifested in the form of monsters like Leviathan or Behemoth. In the Bible, however, these monsters have been created by God. They are not mythic rivals of God for the control of the universe, but they have been tamed by God, created to function almost like pets for God.

On the final level is the priestly narrative in Genesis 1 that continues the cosmological scope of the Wisdom level but that sees the creation account as the first in a series of covenants. This creation account contains those passages that have been interpreted in ways that have supported exploitation of the environment, but upon careful analysis it appears that this narrative does not support such an interpretation. Consider, first of all, the statement that humans are created in the "image of God." This phrase has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but most frequently it has been taken to mean that humans share some characteristic of God that no other creatures have, such as rationality. This interpretation has supported the view that humans are qualitatively distinct from and superior to other creatures. Such a dichotomy between humans and other creatures can serve to legitimate the use or abuse of animals for human purposes with little regard

for how the animals are affected. It turns out, however, that the "image of God" probably does not imply that humans possess some divine characteristic, but rather that they have been assigned a special function by God. That is, just as kings in Biblical times would place their statue ("image") in distant parts of their realm to remind their subjects of who was king, so humans are to represent God in all parts of the earth. (See, for example, Westermann, 1974, pp. 55-60.) The phrase "image of God," then, implies that humans have the responsibility to represent God on earth and to treat and care for the earth in ways that are consistent with the Creator's will for the earth.

Similarly, the Hebrew word that is customarily translated "have dominion over" does not mean that humans can exercise arbitrary power over the earth and do whatever they please with creation. This word is usually employed to describe the kind of rule that responsible and caring monarchs exercise over their people. "To have dominion over the earth," then, does not imply that humans may abuse the environment but suggests that humans are to exercise responsible and caring stewardship of the earth and its resources. (See Limburg, 1971.)

Unfortunately, for the sake of my line of argument, I cannot make a similar case for the other word in the text of Genesis 1 at issue here, "subdue the earth." The word translated "subdue" is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to the conquest of nations or soldiers, the enslaving of people, or even to assaulting a woman. The word clearly supports the image of the conquest, or even rape, of the earth. The best I can do is to appeal to the historical context and suggest that for people in those earlier ages nature could indeed be threatening and need to be tamed or conquered for the sake of human survival -- a sense that we have largely lost except perhaps in the face of natural disasters or when attempting to survive in wilderness or desert areas.

The strata of creation theology continue into the Christian Scriptures. Here I want to focus on only one passage -- from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Ignoring the environment, if not abusing it, has been a corollary of a Christian theology that has emphasized the entrance of Jesus Christ into human history to save or liberate all people -- at the expense of any focus on

creation theology. A passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, 19-23, suggests that it may be erroneous to separate God's creative and liberating activities. There Paul writes that all creation "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." It seems clear that in this passage Paul envisions all of creation as participating in God's final salvation. How much of this is metaphorical we can not be sure, but Paul seems to be countering two tendencies among Christians that were prevalent then and that remain today: a tendency that emphasizes the spiritual at the expense of the physical and another that so stresses hope for the end of time that present, earthly reality is ignored. Paul argues instead that God's salvation includes the physical, not just the spiritual, and that we are bound up with all of creation in God's liberating process right here and now. Paul's argument envisions human reality as interconnected with the rest of creation even in matters of salvation (Bindemann, 1983).

In summary, Biblical creation theology -- in different ways in each of the strata -- supports the following affirmations:

1) There is one God with transcendent power over all of creation. This affirmation may seem less relevant today than during the polytheistic age in which the Bible was first written, but we may need to be reminded of this message as we worship at the shrines of success, money, upward mobility, consumerism, and human convenience.

2) God is essentially a good and caring God. This affirmation, too, may not seem to be relevant today, but it needs to be said to those who see God primarily as a judgmental and vindictive force.

3) God's creation in its origin was essentially good. Surely the reality of evil in the world, as described already in Genesis 3, needs to be taken into account, but the Bible contradicts all those, including people within the Biblical tradition, who reject some aspect of the created order as evil or shameful. Whether it be human sexuality or the arts, the tiniest plant or the largest animal, the creation is to be valued and affirmed for its own sake, not rejected.

4) Humans have been given the responsibility of carefully and respectfully tending the earth and seeing that it thrives

and flourishes. The creation accounts in the Bible do not permit the exploitation of the earth for any and all human purposes; rather they indicate that humans are to treasure the earth's resources that have been entrusted to them. Whether humans deplete natural resources or pollute the environment, we are violating this divine trust.

5) Humans have been created in continuity with the rest of the created order, even as we have been given responsibility for it. Humans are bound up in solidarity with all of creation and are not separate and distinct from other creatures. Ironically, the continuity of all life forms that is a basic corollary of the theory of evolution is affirmed by this implication of Biblical creation theology. This affirmation has implications for, among other things, the issue of animal rights. The Bible supports the notion that animals as well as humans have the right to ethical treatment. Whether dealing with animal rights or other issues of environmental ethics, the Bible supports a position that makes ethical decisions not simply on the basis of the instrumental value of creatures for human purposes, but on the basis of the intrinsic value all the products of God's creative activity possess.

6) The variety of Biblical creation accounts suggests that the message of the Bible's creation theology may legitimately be applied in different ways in distinctive situations. The task of those who accept the Bible's authority is to determine what specific actions are implied for today by the general principles of biblical creation theology. Whatever "having dominion and subduing the earth" may have meant in other eras, today it surely means protecting the earth from overpopulation, toxic wastes, and nuclear holocaust. While the need to limit our use of the earth's resources may not have been obvious in previous ages, it surely is clear now that responsible caring for the earth requires some such limitation.

Based on this discussion of Biblical creation theology, I believe that I have shown that theology can indeed be ecological and environmentally-minded -- that is, in fact, can be a valuable tool for supporting and encouraging appropriate care of the environment.

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