

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is Moncrief's view of our environmental crisis?
2. What does Moncrief think about White's position? Do you agree with his critique of White's position?
3. Can you imagine how White might reply to Moncrief?

# 4 The Judeo-Christian Stewardship Attitude to Nature

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Dobel disagrees with White's thesis that the Christian attitude toward nature is one of arrogance and dominance ("limitless rule of creation"). He argues that the Judeo-Christian attitude is an ethics of stewardship and that humility toward God regarding nature, not arrogance, is enjoined by our religious heritage.

Browsing in a local bookstore recently, I took down several of the more general books from the "Ecology" shelf. Scanning the tables of contents and indexes of 13 books, I discovered that nine of them made reference to "Christianity," "the Bible" or the "Judeo-Christian tradition." Examining their contents more closely, I found that seven of these books blamed specific Christian or Bible-based values as significant "causes" of the ecology crisis.

Over half these books referenced an article by Lynn White, Jr., titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (*Science*, March 10, 1967). In this short, undocumented and simplistic article White argues that the root of the entire problem lies in "the Christian maxim that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." From the Christians' penchant for cutting down sacred Druidic groves to the development of "modern science from natural theology," Christianity, White argues, laid the foundations of Western "arrogance towards nature" and "limitless rule of creation."

Almost all similar statements are indebted to White; they even cite the same examples: grief over the destruction of the sacred groves; respect for Saint Francis of Assisi. Although few of the authors have read anything about him except that he talked to birds, they have raised poor Francis to the rank of first "ecological saint," while conveniently ignoring his myriad admonitions about asceticism and communal ownership of property.

## DOMINION OVER THE EARTH

The ecological indictment of Christianity boils down to two somewhat contradictory assertions: that the postulated transcendence and domination of humanity over nature encourages thoughtless exploitation of the earth and that the otherworldly orientation of Christianity encourages contempt and disregard for the earth. In documenting the first indictment authors often cite Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the

sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” Some also quote Genesis 1:28: “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.”

These texts lead to the conclusion that the Bible emphasizes the absolute superiority of humanity over the rest of creation. And this relation must be primarily one of antagonism and alienation, for “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. . . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Gen. 3:17).

Thus Christianity separates both humanity and God from the earth and destroys the inherent sacredness of the earth. This alienation is coupled with humanity’s innate superiority over nature and the divine mandate to exploit nature limitlessly for human ends—a mandate that is carried out in the context of antagonism and an expectation that the earth must be treated harshly to gain the yield of human survival. Together these notions have shaped Western culture’s spoliation of the earth.

In bringing the second indictment, critics point out that Christianity’s otherworldly preoccupation also contributes to human abuse of the environment. Christians are instructed to “kill everything in you that belongs only to the earthly life” and to “let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth” (Col. 3:2–5). The emphasis is upon awaiting “a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (II Pet. 3:13). In some ways this stress undercuts the mandates of superiority and rule since it implies that humanity rules nothing but a fallen and contemptible orb. If the contempt, however, is tied to an antagonistic human domination and the need of people to discipline their unruly bodies through work, it can provide an ethical framework to support the thoughtless and arrogant exploitation which is part of the ecology crisis. The thesis linking Calvinism with the rise of industrialization reflects this ambivalent world-hating but smug and exploitative attitude.

The critics see modern science and technology along with notions of unbridled progress and exploitation emerging from this Judeo-Christian matrix. They conclude that Christianity must accept most of the “blame” for the unique “Western” perspectives which have led to the present state of affairs. This “blame” somehow rings false when the ecologists extend the link to the later implications of a secularized technology and a liberal view of human progress.

## LOOKING FOR THE ROOTS

The attempt to discover historical roots is a dubious business at best, and in this case it borders on the ludicrous. Christianity’s ecological critics consistently underestimate the economic, social and political influences on modern science and economy; their approach makes for good polemics but bad history. Their thesis lacks a careful historical analysis of the intellectual and practical attitudes toward the earth and its use in the consciously Christian Middle Ages. They disregard the earth-centered ideals of the Christian Renaissance and its concern with the delicate limitations of the Great Chain of Being, and they pay little attention to the emergence of a peculiarly non-Christian deism and theism which defined God in the 17th and 18th centuries to accommodate a newly secularized nature and new developments in science and trade. These critics neglect to mention the specifically Christian prohibitions which often made religion a detriment to economic and scientific development.

They also ignore the rise of the secularized nation-state from the decay of “Christendom”; yet these new government regimes provided much of the impetus to maximize the exploitation of resources and the discovery of new lands. Most of the operative “roots” of the present crisis are to be found in the far more secularized and non-Christian world of nationalism, science and liberalism in the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Given the unsoundness of the theory that blames Christianity for the environmental crisis, it is surprising that it has gained such remarkable currency. In light of this fact there are two distinct tasks which confront the Christian

community. First, this thesis should be addressed in some detail, not only to show its flaws but to discover what ideas and practices the tradition can contribute to a concrete ecological program. Second, we must use the vast ethical and conceptual resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition to develop a God-centered ecological ethic which accounts for the sacredness of the earth without losing sight of human worth and justice. In addressing myself to this second task, I will try to develop appropriate responses to the following questions through textual exegesis of the Bible: What is the ethical status of the earth as an entity in creation? What is the proper relation of humanity to the earth and its resources?

Ecological critics have nostalgically lamented the decline of “nature worship” and have spoken wistfully of the need to import “Eastern” concepts of pantheism or quietist respect for the “equality of all life.” Even some of the most secularized ecologists are calling for a rediscovery of the “sacredness” of nature.

Although it is hard to discover the enduring sacredness of anything in a totally secularized world, we must keep several points in mind about these calls. First, all cultures, regardless of religion, have abused or destroyed large areas of the world either because of economic or population pressures or from simple ignorance. Second, the ethical consequences of the new nature worship, neopantheism and the militant assertion of the equality of all creaturehood pose grave problems for establishing any prior claims of worth or inherent dignity for human beings. The more undifferentiated God and the world become, the harder it is to define individual humans as worthwhile with specific claims to social justice and care. Third, a sort of mindless ecological imperative based upon such notions is ultimately reactionary and anti-human, as well as anti-Christian. There are fundamental ethical differences between plants and animals and between animals and human beings. To resort simplistically to militantly pro-earth and antiprogress positions misses the vital Christian and humanistic point that our sojourn upon the earth is not yet completed and that we must continue to work unflinchingly toward social justice and the well-being of all people.

The unique contribution a Christian ecology can make to the earth is the assertion that we can insist on a reasonable harmony with our world without abandoning our commitment to social justice for all members of our unique and self-consciously alienated species. We can love and respect our environment without obliterating all ethical and technological distinctions, and without denying the demand that we cautiously but steadily use the earth for the benefit of all humanity.

The first question to address is the status of the earth and its resources. A different way of putting this is “Who owns the earth?” The answer of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition is clear: God. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:3). In direct ethical terms God created the earth, and in distributive-justice terms it belongs to him: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1). As an act of pure love he created a world and he “founded the earth to endure” (Ps. 119:90–91).

What kind of world did God create? The answer has two dimensions: the physical or descriptive and the ethical. As a product of nature the world was created as a law-bound entity. The laws are derivative of God’s will for all creation as “maintained by your rulings” (Ps. 119:90–91). Things coexist in intricate and regulated harmony—the basic postulate of science, mythology and reason. Although we have a world of laws, it is also a world of bounty and harmony. For it had been promised that “while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22). It was arranged “in wisdom” so that in the balance of nature, “All creatures depend upon you to feed them . . . you provide the food with a generous hand.” God’s presence ultimately “holds all things in unity” (Col. 1:16–20) and constantly “renews” the world (Ps. 104:24–30). This world abounds in life and is held together in a seamless web maintained by God-willed laws.

In ethical terms, God saw that the world was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). In love and freedom he created the world and valued it as good. All the creatures of the world also share in this goodness (I Tim. 4:4). This does not mean that the world is “good for” some purpose or simply has utilitarian value to humanity. The world, in its bounty and

multiplicity of life, is independently good and ought to be respected as such.

As an independent good, the earth possesses an autonomous status as an ethical and covenanted entity. In Genesis 9:8–17, God directly includes the earth and all the animals as participants in the covenant. He urges the animals to “be fruitful and multiply.” Earlier in Genesis 1:30, he takes care specifically to grant the plant life of the earth to the creatures who possess “breath of life.” In the great covenant with Noah and all humanity, he expressly includes all other creatures and the earth.

And God said, “This is a sign of the covenant which I make between *me and you and every living creature* that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the sky, and it shall be a sign of the *covenant between me and the earth*” [emphasis added].

The prophets, Isaiah especially, constantly address the earth and describe its independent travail. Paul describes the turmoil and travail of the earth as a midwife of all creation and redemption (Rom. 8:18–22). The earth must be regarded as an autonomous ethical entity bound not just by the restraints of physical law but also by respect for its inherent goodness and the covenanted limitations placed upon our sojourn. Perhaps we must think seriously of defining a category of “sins against the earth.”

The proper relation between humanity and the bountiful earth is more complex. One fact is of outstanding moral relevance: the earth does not belong to humanity; it belongs to God. Jeremiah summarizes it quite succinctly: “I by my great power and outstretched arm made the earth, land and animals that are on the earth. And I can give them to whom I please” (Jer. 27:5). For an ecological ethic this fact cannot be ignored. The resources and environment of the earth are not ours in any sovereign or unlimited sense; they belong to someone else.

## A TRUST FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Humanity’s relation to the earth is dominated by the next fact: God “bestows” the earth upon all of humanity (Ps. 115:16). This gift does not,

however, grant sovereign control. The prophets constantly remind us that God is still the “king” and the ruler/owner to whom the earth reverts. No one generation of people possesses the earth. The earth was made “to endure” and was given for all future generations. Consequently the texts constantly reaffirm that the gift comes under covenanted conditions, and that the covenant is “forever.” The Bible is permeated with a careful concern for preserving the “land” and the “earth” as an “allotted heritage” (Ps. 2:7–12).

This point is central to the Judeo-Christian response to the world. The world is given to all. Its heritage is something of enduring value designed to benefit all future generations. Those who receive such a gift and benefit from it are duty-bound to conserve the resources and pass them on for future generations to enjoy. An “earth of abundance” (Judg. 18:10) provides for humanity’s needs and survival (Gen. 1:26–28, 9:2–5). But the injunction “obey the covenant” (I Chron. 16:14–18) accompanies the gift.

There are some fairly clear principles that direct our covenanted responsibilities toward the earth. Each generation exists only as “sojourner” or “pilgrim.” We hold the resources and the earth as a “trust” for future generations. Our covenanted relations to the earth—and for that matter, to all human beings—must be predicated upon the recognition and acceptance of the limits of reality. For there is a “limit upon all perfection” (Ps. 119:96), and we must discover and respect the limits upon ourselves, our use of resources, our consumption, our treatment of others and the environment with its delicate ecosystems. Abiding by the covenant means abiding by the laws of nature, both scientific and moral. In ecological terms the balance of nature embodies God’s careful plan that the earth and its bounty shall provide for the needs and survival of all humanity of all generations.

The combined emphases upon God’s ownership, our trusteeship and the limits of life call for an attitude of humility and care in dealing with the world. Only “the humble shall have the land for their own to enjoy untroubled peace”

(Ps. 37:11). Knowledge of limits, especially of the intricacy of the ecosystems, makes humility and care a much more natural response. The transgression of limits usually brings either unknown or clearly dangerous consequences and ought to influence all actions with a singular sense of caution. Humility and respect do not mean simple awe, or withdrawal from all attempts to use or improve the bounty we are given. At the very least, they lead to the loss of arrogant ignorance which leads us to pursue policies in contradiction to the clear limits and laws of nature and particular ecosystems.

## THE STEWARDSHIP IMPERATIVE

The New Testament distills these notions and adds a strong activist imperative with its account of stewardship. This activist element is a vital alternative to some of the more extreme ethical positions in reactionary ecological ethics. The parable of the good steward in Luke 12:41–48 and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 summarize the concept. The preservation of what is given “in trust” demands a recognition of the owner’s dictates for the resources. We must know the limits and laws of the world in order to use them wisely. Our actions must be guided, in part, by concerns for future generations. Above all, we must never knowingly exhaust or ruin what has been given to us. If doing so is absolutely necessary to sustain life, then equity demands that we must leave some equally accessible and beneficial legacy to replace what has been exhausted.

But there is more involved in being a “faithful and wise steward.” Even the most conservative banker is obliged to improve the stock for the benefit of the heirs. The parable of the talents makes it abundantly clear that we who are entrusted with his property will be called to account for our obligation to improve the earth. The stewardship imperative assumes that the moral and ecological constraints are respected, and it adds the obligation to distribute the benefits justly. The steward must “give them their portion of the food at the proper time.” Mistreating his charges, gorging himself on the resources in excess consumption, and not caring

for the resources will all cause the stewards to be “cut off.” True stewardship requires both respect for the trusteeship and covenanted imperatives and an active effort to improve the land for the future and to use it in a manner to benefit others. Ethical proportionality applies to all those responsible for the earth, for “when a man has had a great deal given to him on trust, even more will be expected of him” (Luke 12:48–49).

## AN INFORMED HUMILITY

The lessons are clear. Any ecological ethic which takes into account both God and humanity and does not reduce both to some extension of undifferentiated nature must begin with a rejection of the unbridled sovereignty of humanity over the earth. In this rejection is the recognition that all work upon the earth must be informed by a clear understanding of and respect for the earth as an autonomous and valuable entity and the laws of nature on which the bounty of the earth depends.

These are necessary but by no means sufficient within the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the earth, while it possesses its own moral autonomy, is not God and must not be confused as such. Our own relation to it must be predicated upon a careful understanding that earth and its resources are for any generation a restricted gift held in trust for future generations. We must never lose sight of the fact that a just and informed humility provides the framework for a working relationship with the earth.

Much more work remains to be done on the “ethics of stewardship”; I have merely suggested a few ethical considerations: the obligation not to exhaust nonrenewable resources, the imperative to provide accessible replacements, the necessity to improve our heritage modestly and carefully, the greater responsibility of the advantaged to improve that which exists and to share, and the obligation to refrain from excessive consumption and waste. “Each of you has received a special gift, so like good stewards responsible for all the different gifts of God, put yourselves at the service of others” (I Pet. 4:10–11).