

## **Biblical Faith and Environmental Crisis** **by Owen L. Norment**

The human timeline on Earth is very long, stretching back more than five million years to our earliest hominid ancestors, more than two million to the emergence of the genus *Homo*, a million and a half to *Homo erectus*, at least 200,000 to the earliest archaic form of *Homo sapiens*, and some 40,000 to the appearance of our own kind, modern *Homo sapiens*. Yet by contrast, it has taken us a scant two hundred years to come from relative stability to the brink of ecological disaster in the wake of the industrial and subsequent petroleum-based and technological revolutions and the concomitant worldwide population explosion.

There is widespread unawareness of and misinformation about the reality of the situation — of what is now a multilayered environmental crisis — and of the urgency of effective response. This state of denial is encouraged by various columnists, opinion-shapers, and power-brokers who, whether driven by short-sighted economic goals and national agendas, or by right-wing religious or political ideologies, variously persist in confusing and deflecting public opinion.

While every purported fact and serious dissenting argument (especially those of the relatively few still cautiously un-persuaded scientists) demands respectful analysis, we no longer have time for baseless denial and deliberate confusion. The situation is too perilous, the potential dangers too grave, to permit continuing hesitation and inaction. Religious communities in particular now urgently need to play a leading prophetic and educational role in seeking to inform popular opinion and reform public policy.

Various historical developments and attitudinal factors have converged to bring us to these circumstances:

One we might call the *commodification of nature*. This of course is historically grounded in necessity, initially for basic survival but increasingly — and with escalating momentum — for the multitudinous kinds of material, inventive, exploratory, and life-enhancing development of which only *Homo sapiens* is capable. All of this has been driven as well by the complexity of motives of which also presumably only *Homo sapiens* is capable. Thus heedless and often profiteering exploitation of natural resources has more and more rampantly proceeded.

All of this both reflects and encourages a disconnection of our use of natural resources from any coherent value-system guiding such use, a *disconnection of utility and value*. This in turn has exacerbated the misuse and overuse of resources, in ever-increasing magnitude, as exponential population growth, economic expansion, and cumulative industrial development — notably just now as part of the understandable aspiration of heretofore under-developed societies — have surged ahead. And all too often, what has been called “the law of unintended consequences” kicks in, as unforeseen aftereffects or side effects of our activities arrive unbidden. In their earliest manifestations, many environmental and socio-economic problems have likely arisen in just this manner.

More deeply, various worldviews and cultural patterns, political and religious, that have emerged historically underlie and give rise to this kind of disconnection and its consequences. Often basic to these worldviews and patterns, especially in Western history, is the categorical separation of the human from nature with respect both to qualities of essential being (ontological status) and worth. When human existence is thus set over against nature, nature becomes objectified, “out there,” seen as a proper object of control, manipulation, domination, and exploitation. It is devalued, seen more as antagonist than as essential and supportive context of our lives. We in turn lose a sense of the whole, of our proper symbiotic relation to natural order and systems, and consequently of our proper and indeed unique responsibility within Earth’s inclusive biosphere. Our own destiny is divorced from that of the rest of the world order.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, this conceptual split for many is rooted in and driven by a literalistic and largely specious interpretation of the Genesis accounts of creation, according to which humankind is given dominion (read domination) over all other — and lesser — creatures. In consequence, we may claim license from God fully to exploit for our own benefit, indeed to use up, available resources. When this attitude is coupled with an equally specious apocalyptic expectation of the imminent end of the world, we may feel that it really doesn’t matter: there will be no future generations for whom we should feel responsibility. And some fundamentalists of course welcome this eventuality, as the recently popular *Left Behind* series of novels seem to attest. Thus ideology overwhelms reality, and unrestrained, uncoordinated development proceeds in the mental and moral obliviousness born of shortsighted exuberance, misinformation, impatient aspiration and, all too often, simple economic greed.

Multiple and complexly interrelated issues now confront us. Current attention is mostly centered on climate change — global warming and its ramifications. The predominant scientific consensus is that global warming is real, worsening, and of great urgency. Denial of this reality no longer seems at all credible. Discussion as to causes remains legitimate; certainly geological factors, Earth cycles, solar activity, etc., must be taken into account. But much evidence supports significant human causation, with a magnitude of probable warming well beyond the likelihood of causation simply by global cooling-warming cycles. We have spewed a massive, long-lasting, and worsening carbon dioxide canopy into the atmosphere. Potential effects of greenhouse-effect warming include steadily worsening atmospheric pollution; melting of polar ice and deglaciation in many regions; possibly drastic rise in sea levels, threatening seaports and coastal populations and disrupting Gulf Stream currents by huge influxes of polar ice-melt; intensifying storms and regional extremes of drought and flooding; and loss of human and animal habitat and arable land.

There are serious collateral issues as well, not immediately caused by warming but bound up with it in the complex of threats to Earth’s ecological balance and the human prospect. Acid rain stemming from industrial pollution of the atmosphere continues to inflict havoc on forestlands. Unnatural and irreversible extinction of species (flora and fauna), resulting from various human activities, persists unabated; one estimate suggests that half of all current species of plants and animals will be extinct by the year 2100. Even though rates are diminishing, explosive population growth continues, exerting great consumption pressure on natural resources and fomenting political pressure for rapid development in countries such as China and India. And the increasingly imminent depletion of petroleum resources so essential to modern civilization

portends what one analyst (James Howard Kunstler) describes as “the long emergency” we will face if — when? — the oil finally does run out.

This full spectrum of environmental issues must be borne in mind if we are to avoid simplistic, short-term, and in the long run ineffective solutions. It is not enough, for example, simply to think in terms of energy independence, or of unearthing resources adequate to sustain our current way of life, with its wasteful excesses, for some foreseeable future. Rather, radical diminishment of consumption, changes in lifestyle, forthright addressing of issues of population, waste, pollution, public indifference, and so on, are necessary, as well as the exercise of extraordinary geopolitical leadership in the effort to secure international cooperation in facing this world crisis.

With respect to theological resources we might propose as appropriate to discussion of these issues, our profound and immediate need is to foster a new sense of and sensibility toward the natural order and the supporting planet itself. It is not enough to assess blame, pointing to corporations, politicians, foreign powers as the culprits, or to look for expedient ways to “fix” this or that problem. Rather, we must recognize and seek radically to transform the underlying attitudes, patterns, and practices of consumption that we tend to take for granted. For the problem is not simply *extrinsic* to ourselves as consumers and citizens, “out there,” objectified, but *intrinsic* to the values and social structures we commonly share and depend upon. As one perceptive analyst writes, “The problem for even the best-intentioned environmental activism is that it imagines it must confront a problem external to itself . . . . What the environmental movement does not acknowledge is that something in the very fabric of our daily life is deeply anti-nature as well as anti-human” (Curtis White, “The Idols of Environmentalism,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2007, 13; first published in *Orion*).

So at the core of a sound theological basis for the renewal of environmental responsibility is the recovery — or rediscovery — of a deep, reverential caring for nature, an experiential, affective — for some even mystical and spiritual — sense of oneness with all living beings and with the awesome generative Source on which all depend. Environmentalism, says White, “should look to create a common language of care (a reverence for and a commitment to the astonishing fact of Being) through which it could begin to create alternative principles by which we might live” (*ibid.*, 17).

Such awareness seems part of the deep intuitive apprehension of reality underlying the emergence, typically in mythic form, of various spiritual and pre-rational traditions concerning the Earth and our relation to it. The biblical doctrine of creation draws upon and confirms the wisdom of this deep wellspring of knowing. Further, our interpretation of the biblical understanding of creation needs to take account of and in principle to be coherent with the best evidence of the natural sciences and allied disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, and paleontology concerning human origins and our connection to the rest of the created order.

Thus grounded, a biblically oriented understanding of creation may well affirm the primal reality of divine intention, teleology, hence inherent meaning and worth, in the cosmic process, as is of course assumed in the Genesis accounts and variously elsewhere throughout the Hebrew scriptures. This is not a simplistic “creationism” at odds with natural science, but a discernment

and positing of a superintending matrix and purpose — some would call it Universal Spirit — of a sort or at a level deeper than empirical description of evolutionary process.

This line of thought seems beautifully expressed in the “creation spirituality” envisioned by mystical theologian Matthew Fox, in which the whole spectrum of emerging reality is vibrant with divine presence and energy. Other modern theological traditions, for example process theology, similarly emphasize the integral relation between Creator and creation. Unlike the model of classical theism, in which God is often seen as objectively transcendent over against the created universe, in this holistic worldview the creation is fully within the universe-encompassing scope of God as Being Itself. So while the Creator as Ground of Being is in one sense transcendent, s/he is immanent as well within all beings in a unified cosmos. Speculation of this sort coheres rather well, by the way, with the cosmological reflections of some interpreters of the implications of contemporary quantum physics.

Such abstract language is of course beyond the purview of the biblical texts; the Bible after all is ancient literature, with a largely archaic and pre-scientific view of the world and its problems. We cannot expect to draw from it a ready-made environmental theology. But there are starting points: basic emphases and characteristics of spiritually robust and deeply ethical faith traditions that can indeed provide essential orientation for thinking theologically about environmental responsibility.

Fundamentally important is the radical monotheism of biblical faith, in and under which all things and all times cohere. Moreover, the Hebrew scriptures often display an exuberant celebration of the natural world and human existence (perhaps reflected in words of the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy”), a sense of awe before the wonders of creation: consider for example Psalms such as 8, 19, 24, 104, 148; or Job 38-41. There is also in scripture as a whole a profound undercurrent of divine grace, incipient from the beginning, increasingly prominent in Hebrew prophets and Christian Gospels and letters: the Creator/Source is also Reconciler and Redeemer, intending and embracing needed transformation of human wrongdoing. It is this grace that grounds and makes possible the confession of wrongdoing and repentance (literally “change of mind” in biblical language) that are essential to real changes in the way we live.

The Genesis creation narratives, especially the sweeping “Heavens and Earth” summary in chapter 1, reflect the awesomeness of the divine project. This first account and the Garden of Eden story that follows (2:4-25) seem also clearly to imply the wholeness of the creation and especially the interconnectedness of humankind with the other living creatures, in what is sometimes called the interdependent web of life. Within this web human beings are not really entitled to claim a uniquely subjective relation to the external objectivity of all the rest. Thus human superiority is one of degree and vocation rather than kind; and the vocation of “dominion” (ch. 1) is one of responsible stewardship in the Creator’s behalf, as well as — in modern idiom — for the common good (annotations in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* suggest “benevolence” and “peace” as implications of this caring dominion; they note as well the implicit vegetarianism in the primordial prohibition of killing among all animals, human included: “everything that has the breath of life”).

Every stage of creation, and finally the whole of it, is declared by the Creator to be “good,” “very good” (Genesis 1). In a holistic creation, being and worth are derived from the Creator and are integral and inseparable. One might gather from this the *intrinsic* rather than merely *instrumental* or *utilitarian* worth of all creatures and therefore their deserving of human care, good will, *benevolence*. While creatures may be put to use in various ways for human benefit, they must be treated humanely and with respect. None is just a disposable object. So to love *God* with all one’s heart and soul and might — Israel’s ancient faith confession and admonition (Deuteronomy 6:5) — would seem to require responsible care for the wellbeing of all that God has made and pronounced good: in a word, *love*.

A familiar bumper-sticker slogan says, “The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth.” A biblical take on that might suggest that we and other creatures and the Earth all together belong to God: “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it . . .” (Psalm 24).

The creation stories imply that “in the beginning” a kind of primordial harmony and peace prevailed on the new Earth. But the sequel (Genesis 3, temptation and fall and the aftermath) injects a harsh note of realism, borne out in multifarious ways of alienation and violence in human history. Literally, such a time of accord never was, but still the harmony and peace motif has a kind of archetypal power as a memorable symbol of ideal possibilities the future may hold; thus it becomes in a sense the seedbed of biblical *eschatology* — a word that simply means reflection upon or beliefs about the end times, history’s ultimate outcome or meaning. This symbolic motif surfaces for example in early prophetic visions of swords and spears beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks (Isaiah 2, Micah 4) or of an Eden-like “peaceable kingdom” wherein wild predators and domestic animals will happily rest and graze together (Isaiah 11).

By the time of Jesus, an apocalyptic form of eschatology was heavy in the air, following centuries of buffeting and exploitation by dominating powers. This way of thought asserted the nearness of divine intervention to vanquish and judge the wicked and oppressors, often with vengeful overtones. Though he likely was influenced by this current, Jesus’ paramount vision was of the kingdom of God, a divinely established reign of justice, mercy, and peace that would overturn the rule of malign powers and that already was available to disciples as a transformative reality within and among them (cf. Luke 17). Similarly, the apostle Paul, while he employs dramatic last-day imagery, more deeply stresses human transformation within a community secured by the justice and peace of God rather than imperial conquest. For those who are “in Christ” — that is, committed to vital spiritual and social change — there is already, in heart and mind, “a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The ancient cosmology and images may be seen as non-essential literary framing. The true heart of biblical eschatology is an urgent call for world transformation, not annihilation. It speaks of the end of the world not in the sense of finality (*finis*) but of goal, fulfillment (*telos*). It dreams of a new day, not doomsday. It links the core values inherent in a vibrant creation spirituality with a heightened sense of historical possibility, a realm of possibility that needs clearly to be distinguished from the literal battlefield eschatology expounded by some religious fundamentalists.

There is no easy road to reclamation of an environment already heavily damaged by human excesses, and biblical faith provides no detailed directions on how to proceed. It does offer for consideration some prefatory suggestions and principles: a renewed and reverential awareness of our profound connection to nature; a recognition of the wholeness of reality and the interdependence of all living beings; an affirmation of a meaningful creation and the worth of all creatures; a declaration of supportive divine grace; an emphasis on human responsibility for the preservation of the world order, the vocation of responsible dominion; and the summons of hope, of historic possibility, of the recovery and fulfillment, however imperfect, of the divine end (*telos*) intended in the beginning.