

Biblical Man:

Nature's Servant-King

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Our newspapers and our conversations are more and more being focussed on problems of pollution and the destruction of the environment. And this publicity is rapidly making us aware of the fact that questions of conservation and ecological balance are questions of deep moral significance--perhaps even among the key moral issues of our time. Nearly everyone is now prepared to accept the fact that we have only a precarious hold upon our environment, and nearly everyone is prepared also to grant that responsible attitudes toward the natural world are incumbent upon those who would be moral.

What I want to consider here is this: the Judeo-Christian tradition, finding its normative expression in the Bible, is now rather frequently being cited as the chief spiritual cause of our current environmental crisis; that is to say, many are now blaming Christianity and Judaism for our environmental problems. How so? The critics claim that it is the biblical tradition more than any other which has set man against nature--alienating him from nature by giving him mastery and dominion over it. And it is said that this alienation accounts for man's willingness to despoil the earth.

Lynn White, Jr., historian and Christian, has offered what is probably the most influential version of this accusation.¹ White suggests that what people do with respect to their environment depends to a large

1. Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, 155 (10 March 1967), 1203-1207.

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extent upon their beliefs about nature and human density, that is, upon their religion. Technology and culture in the West, therefore, are to be seen as dependent in many ways upon Christianity. And so he suggests that we look at the Christian view of the relation of man to environment. Christianity, he tells us, is clearly the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen: it not only establishes a gulf between man and nature; it also insists that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his own proper ends.

Western paganism was not so. To the pagan animist, every natural thing was animated and guarded by a spiritual reality, and that spiritual reality had to be taken into account. By denying animism and declaring that the one God who had created everything was not contained in his creation, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. And so, the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning already with the first two chapters of *Genesis*, critics like White say, has preached that nature was made for man, that man has dignity and ultimate worth while his environment has no such dignity and only instrumental worth; man has been understood as properly subjugating nature--as using it and bringing it under control. And, critics like Lynn White conclude, it is precisely this broad view of the relation of man to nature which has blinded us to the need for balance and inter-action in the 'biosphere'.

It is, of course, possible to lean too heavily upon factors such as these in explaining the origin of our environmental problems; and Lewis Moncrief has quite properly called attention to the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition is only one of the many cultural factors involved.² Moncrief points out that White himself has suggested that man has been altering his environment dramatically and often tragically since early antiquity; and if this is the case, then it cannot be the case that Christianity uniquely disposes cultures to exploit their environments. And, as Moncrief also argues, to cite the biblical tradition as the cause of our environmental problems is to blind ourselves to many other important cultural factors contributing to the problem.

But even if this be true, as I think that it is, it is nevertheless also true that Christian theologians have often read the stories in *Genesis* in a way which allows and encourages environmental abuse; and in so doing such theologians have contributed heavily to a mind-set which has reinforced man's natural tendencies toward greed and short-sightedness. This being the case, it seems to me (and to many others) that we need to

2. Lewis W. Moncrief, 'The Cultural Basis for our Environmental Crisis', *Science*, 170 (30 October 1970), 508-512.

undertake some fundamental study religiously of man's relation to the rest of creation; that is, we need to work out what might be called an 'environmental theology'.

An impressive beginning has been made by a young American pastor named Frederick Elder in a book which he has entitled *Crisis in Eden*.³ Elder argues that in our culture there are two major and contrasting ways to understand the relation of man to nature. One way is this: nature can be thought of as the sum of physical systems apart from man and his civilisation; thus, man is understood as being external to nature, as being not a part of nature. The second, contrasting, way is this: nature can be thought of as an all-encompassing reality which includes man and his civilisation as well as the other things in the world; in this view man is seen as being internal to nature, as being a part of nature. Elder calls those who hold the first view 'exclusionists', and those who hold the second he calls 'inclusionists'.

Who are the exclusionists? Mostly, this group consists of those who have stressed man's technological advance and competence, man's ability to more and more control more and more of his environment. Engineers, in particular, have taken this view. Such people, at least in the immediate past, have not characteristically thought of man as being a dependent part of a system--they have seen him instead as being outside the system of nature, using it, controlling it, manipulating it.

Who are the inclusionists? Mostly, this group consists of men working in the life sciences: biologists, botanists, anthropologists, farmers, and (perhaps centrally) conservationists and ecologists. Such people have often stressed in their work that all of creation is interdependent, that all-that-is forms a system, and that this is an over-arching consideration.

Where have the Christian theologians stood? It is difficult to find any who have given much support to the inclusionists. Francis of Assisi, perhaps, did so, as did Albert Schweitzer. But although both of these men are deeply respected by Christians, neither of them has been very influential among professional theologians. On the other hand, many theologians have been among the most extreme of the exclusionists.

Harvey Cox, for example, a young Baptist theologian who wrote an influential book entitled *The Secular City*⁴, claims that in the future the city will become the dominant form of life; he suggests that the whole world will become a city and that this means that the natural order

3. Frederick Elder, *Crisis in Eden* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1970).

4. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965 [revised edition, 1966]); cf., *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), esp. 101f.

will then be fully subjugated, subdued, and controlled by man.

Herbert Richardson, another young Protestant theologian, claims that in the future advanced technology will create a wholly artificial environment--man and machine will become quite literally one. Man, claims Richardson, will become literally a part of him. And when this happens, there will be no 'nature' left at all.⁵

A rather different style of thinking is found in the writings of the famous Jesuit paleontologist and theologian, Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard tried to understand human destiny in terms of evolutionary growth and concluded that all of nature longs to be mankind and that the earth realises its ultimate worth only when that unit, man, comes to full expression. And so he envisaged as a future hope a time when man would completely conquer nature, establishing a single organised membrane over the earth and forming 'an almost solid mass of hominized substance'.⁶ (Something, I can imagine, like a gigantic popcorn ball of humanity.)

This trio of contemporary theologians, Harvey Cox, Herbert Richardson, and Teilhard de Chardin, may well be extreme examples; but it does seem clear enough that most Christian theologians have been exclusionists in their doctrine of nature. Frederick Elder suggests, and I agree, that Christian theologians have supported the exclusionist doctrine of the relation of man to nature because they have often been wrongly anthropocentric, wrongly man-centered, in their ethical and religious orientation.

What we need now, Elder continues, is an ethical and religious orientation which refuses always to put man at the centre of things; and so he proposes an environmental theology, one which sees man as merely one part, albeit a part with special functions, of an inter-related group of creatures--an environmental theology which sees man as forced to live in harmony with all God's creatures. The ideas of subduing, dominating, and controlling nature, he argues, must be given up in favour of a mode of life in which man works with nature and not against it. This he calls a 'biocentric', life-centered, view of religion and ethics.

What bothers Elder is that Christians (and presumably also many Jews) have taken too seriously the claim in *Genesis* that God has given them domination over the earth, that God allows man the right to rule the earth; and he thinks that it is because they have taken their right to the privileges of a certain kind of kingship so seriously that they have subjugated, exploited, and despoiled the earth. He seems to conclude that it would be best for Christians to abandon the notions of mastery and dominion

5. Herbert Richardson, *Toward an American Theology*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

6. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 2nd ed, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 240.

altogether.

In order to facilitate this abandonment, he suggests that Christians in the future should give relatively little attention to the second story of creation in *Genesis* (2.4--2.25), stressing dominion, and much more attention to the first (1.1--2.3), a story which he sees as altogether different and milder in spirit, stressing cooperation and stewardship rather than dominion and mastery. Elder's suggestion is not a stupid one, but I suspect that his reading of these first few verses of *Genesis* will not be entirely acceptable to many Old Testament scholars.

Donald Gowan, for example, a teacher of Old Testament at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, claims that Elder is mistaken in thinking that the story of man's creation found in *Genesis* 1 is biocentric while the companion story in *Genesis* 2 is anthropocentric.

Gowan claims that the creation narratives in *Genesis* emphasise that man was created in the image of God and that this is to be understood in a very specific way: in antiquity a conqueror might erect an image of himself in a country he had subdued as a visible sign of his rule over the area; and lesser kings or governors who exercised authority in such countries exercised it by virtue of their possession of that image.⁷ It has been suggested⁸ that in the Old Testament man possesses such an image of God and that man should therefore be understood as having been put on earth to represent God's power over all created things. That is, it has been suggested that in the biblical tradition man is a sort of lieutenant-governor representing the majesty of Almighty God in the province earth.

This suggestion outlined by Gowan is strongly reinforced by certain relatively recent Old Testament researches⁹ which have suggested that it is highly probable that significant portions of the early books of the Old Testament are in large measure and intentionally modelled after legal documents in Mesopotamian feudalism called "suzerainty treaties"--legal papers drawn up between great emperors and their subject kings and outlining the rights and duties of such subject kings. In such documents the lesser, vassal-kings were seen as responsible to the suzerain for the welfare of their people. That is, the emperor was seen as caring for all the people of his empire; but because he could not personally tend to all of them, he entrusted to lesser kings certain responsibilities. And the dominion of these lesser kings consisted precisely in the responsibility of caring for and protecting the people under their authority.

Why are several sections of the Old Testament modelled on the

7. Donald E. Gowan, 'Genesis and Ecology: Does "Subdue" mean "Plunder"?', *Christian Century*, 87 (7 October 1970), 1188.
8. e.g., Edmund Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), 166-172.
9. e.g., George Mendenhall, 'Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East', *The Biblical Archeologist*, 17 (May, September, 1954), 24-46, 49-76.

suzerainty treaties of their period? Presumably this is so because the bible sees God as being very much like a great emperor, a suzerain who rules all creation. Presumably the bible also sees the relationship holding between God and his people as being very much like the relationship holding between emperors and their vassal-kings. Thus, man (and especially as exemplified in Adam, 'The Man') becomes responsible to God for the welfare of the earth. If this is so, then the earth is not man's to do with as he sees fit; instead, the earth is God's precious possession entrusted to man; so, if man is like a vassal-king, then his kingship rightly consists in stewardship, in the caring for the earth which rightly belongs not to him but to God.

I suggest, then, that Gowan has correctly located the theological place of man in nature: man occupies a very special place in nature; he is king of nature, but he is a vassal-king ruling the earth in the place of God, as the vicar of God, and therefore strictly accountable to God for the welfare of the earth. It is true, then, that the biblical faith teaches that man has been given dominion over the earth and commanded to "subdue" it. But it is false that this dominion and authority can correctly be taken as a license to exploit, despoil, or destroy. The stories in *Genesis* make man responsible, in the sense of accountable, to God for the welfare of the earth.

This claim that the Judeo-Christian tradition sees man as rightly a responsible steward of the earth has become a common one, and I suspect that it is rapidly establishing itself as the consensus of contemporary theological opinion. But in itself it says not nearly enough; granted that man is responsible to God for the welfare of the earth, we still need to inquire into what might count as responsible stewardship--and here there is nothing like a consensus of opinion. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the biblical witness knows nothing of environmental problems as we envisage them; and so it can provide very little direct and immediately serviceable advice. I propose to surmount this problem by reflecting upon the conceptual implications of certain positions which are carefully elaborated in the biblical record; and in so doing, I will part intellectual company with Gowan by rejecting his conception of what kingship really entails.

How does a vassal-king, a vicar, a lieutenant-governor, know how he ought to act? He knows that he stands in the place of his master; he knows that his job is to represent the majesty of the Great King; therefore, he knows that as the king's representative (i.e., his deputy) he

ought to act precisely as the king himself would act were he there. This being the case, the Christian knows that he acts responsibly in the world precisely when he does what God would do. In general, in the biblical record everything which is precious to God and he would love and protect it; and so the trust which is given to man is a grave one indeed: he dare not allow the earth to be harmed or destroyed, and he dare not lose respect for creation in its own right.

The lesson to be learned from reflection upon kingship in general is underscored when the Christian thinks on the theological significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is relevant to this discussion because to Christians he is the chief image of God's majesty; he is, in the most radical way possible, the vicar of the divine. And so, when Christians wonder how they are to act, they look to Jesus as an example. And how does Jesus act? He is Christ the king possessing regal authority; and it is what he does with that authority which is striking: he washes the feet of his disciples; he submits to a crown of thorns; he is humiliated; he dies for the sake of others.

The paradigm Jesus presents is that of one who voluntarily renounces the privilege which normally accompanies the responsibilities of kingship and focusses his attention intensely upon the conception of kingship as service: Jesus is the servant-king who sees his dominion to be nothing other than service. It is here that an important clue is to be found. If he who is said to be the very image of God, reflecting God's glory so perfectly that he can appropriately be called God's son, understands kingship as service, then Christians can do no less. But 'biblical man' is the vassal-king of the world; his subjects, therefore, are all of them non-human creatures. It follows that he exists in part to serve the non-human world: just as Christ humbled himself to his disciples, so Christians are committed to humbling themselves to the natural world over which they have been given dominion by their suzerain.

Although I am persuaded that biblical man ought to be understood in part as nature's servant, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that nature ought to be understood as man's master. The service Jesus rendered to his disciples, after all, was not the service rendered by a slave to his master; rather, it was the service one friend renders to another. It is interesting to note that not long after Jesus had washed his disciples' feet he said to them, "I shall not call you servants any more...I call you friends" (John 15.15, *Jerusalem Bible*). This decision to extend an offer of deep friendship is astonishing because, as Aristotle had

observed much earlier,¹⁰ friendship is only possible between equals. Therefore, when Christ the king extended friendship to man, he upset the conventional master-servant relationship holding between God and man, lifting man in a very important sense to God's level.

My suggestion is that the service which man can appropriately offer to non-human creation is the service not of a slave but of a friend. And so I see the implications of certain of the more important biblical insights into the character of the relation of man to God and nature to be that human and non-human creatures ought really to live a life characterized by some sort of profound friendship; and it surely follows from this that the Christian is committed to the proposition that all creation, and not men merely, ought to be treated with respect and concern. I seek, then, a world in which the alienation of man from nature is overcome in the concern and respect which is the mark of the good king, which is the mark of a true friend.

The thesis which I have here presented is not altogether consonant with what Christian theologians today generally hold, and it may even prove to be profoundly contradictory to what is commonly advocated. While most, perhaps virtually all, theologians would agree with me that man is properly a steward responsible to God for the welfare of the earth, very few would grant my further claim that man exists in part to serve the non-human world. Some radical conservationists, like, for example, Aldo Leopold in his classical essay 'The Land Ethic',¹¹ would presumably agree with me, but most Christian theologians would insist that all of life has been created for man's use and therefore would see man's stewardship as rightly guided exclusively by considerations of human need and interest. Gowan, for example, not only allows that it is all right for man to use nature for his own purposes, but insists, more strongly, that man ought to do so. Gowan would have man govern the earth responsibly; but to Gowan responsible kingship appears to be equivalent to prudent kingship, where prudence is understood as enlightened self-interest.

Apparently, Gowan assumes that subjects exist for the sake of their sovereign and in order to serve him; and this is not an uncommon assumption, especially in the United States - where a tradition uncharitable to monarchy has long been established. I, on the other hand, have suggested that in the biblical view God's vassal-kings exist in part for the sake of their people and in order to serve them. Perhaps a bolder claim could be made: perhaps it would not be implausible to suggest that the biblical story centering in the incarnation reveals a God who understands himself in

10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158b, 1159a.

11. Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic', *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 237-264.

all his regal majesty as existing for the sake of his people and that he sees even his dominion as suzerain as consisting precisely in the service he renders to those subject to him. For me, at least, such a claim would do much toward explaining how it could be that Christ died for me and not a little toward explicating the meaning of Christ's admonition that 'anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it' (Mt. 16.25, *Jerusalem Bible*).

It is now clear to everyone that we are in the midst of an environmental crisis and that we might well fail to survive that crisis. Not a few thoughtful people have come to believe that we will not survive the crisis unless we repudiate our biblical heritage. Ian McHarg, for example, in a speech given recently to students at Queen's University, refers to Genesis 1.26-28 (in which God gives to man mastery over the earth) as 'horrifying lines', 'a calamitous text', and claims that there is no repudiation of it either in the New Testament or in subsequent Christian tradition. I will not repudiate the text, but I believe that I have provided at least the groundwork for an interpretation of this and similar texts which is both exegetically and ecologically sound. In so doing I have offered reason to believe that ecological concern and biblical faith can converge in a way much more radical than most Christians have in the past imagined.

Gowan, together with virtually all other theologians (implicitly or explicitly), appears to have accepted the Kantian claim that among God's creatures man and only man is a priceless end in himself who cannot rightly be treated as a means merely. As a result, he, together with other theologians, considers non-human creation exclusively from the standpoint of human expedience. It is precisely this theological denial of dignity to non-human creation which I want to suggest is inconsistent with the very idea of man understood as the vicar of God and may well thereby turn out to be profoundly unbiblical after all. The biblical witness seems clear: Christians worship a God whom they believe loves his creation and has entrusted it to their care; surely, then, Christians dare not do less than care for it lovingly and even sacrificially.

Perhaps Francis of Assisi came closest to living the kind of theology I am suggesting. Lynn White claims that Francis 'tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy for all God's creatures',¹² and he did so by thinking of all creation as a part of a great brotherhood, referring to 'brother ant' and 'sister fire', to 'brother earth' and 'sister moon'.

12. Lynn White, Jr., *op. cit.*, 1206.

Let me review the argument of the paper to this point. I began by calling attention to the accusation that the doctrine of nature found in *Genesis* is an important cause of our environmental crisis. I accepted the claim that Christian theologians have often and wrongly encouraged attitudes which have resulted in ecological imbalance and deterioration of the environment, and I suggested that Frederick Elder was right in thinking that this has resulted from an 'exclusionist' doctrine of nature wrongly anthropocentric in shape. But I suggested further that correctly understood the biblical tradition sees man not as master of the earth free to do as he pleases but as a steward responsible to God for the welfare of the earth. Furthermore, I suggested that this responsibility consists in offering the kind of service which one friend offers to another. And so, although man may well be king of the earth, he must be a servant-king. I seek, then, a world in which the alienation of man from nature is overcome in the concern and respect which is the mark of a good king, the mark of a true friend. Finally, I have characterized this as a development of an essentially Franciscan theology.

Frederick Elder has called for a biocentric theology and ethic to take the place of the conventional too-narrowly anthropocentric ethic. What I have suggested is, I think, biocentric and more: it is what might be called a theocentric, God-centered, ethic; and it is one which allows for a creative response to our environmental difficulties. But although I have gone beyond Elder in the way that I suggest that Christians understand themselves, their God, and the world, I do not want to go beyond Elder when it comes to certain more specific suggestions about morality.

Elder suggests that Christians, and, indeed, everyone else, need a new morality with at least three planks:¹³

1. We need an ethic of restraint.
2. We need an emphasis upon quality.
3. We need to cultivate a reverence for life.

Let me conclude this paper by commenting briefly on each of these proposals.

First, Elder suggests that we need an ethic of restraint. What does he mean? Well, in the past we have usually felt that anything was all right unless we knew of some reason which made it wrong. And so we did, especially technologically, nearly anything we could. Now we are reaping the bitter fruits of this spirit; for time and time again we have discovered too late that what we did proved to have undesirable consequences

13. Frederick Elder, *op. cit.*, 145.

of which we had no prior knowledge. Elder would have us shift the burden of proof: he thinks that we should in the future restrain ourselves, doing what we need do and no more, using what resources we need use and no more.

Second, Elder suggests that we need a new emphasis upon quality. What does he mean? Several things, I think. One is just this: we live in an age in which mostly what we produce is cheap junk. And because what we make is so insignificant and so unsatisfying, we quickly cast it off and produce more. But this uses up our resources and increases pollution at an alarming rate. If, on the other hand, what we did and made was of higher quality, then we could do and make less and still have a satisfying life. And so, the pursuit of quality would tend to bring with it a dramatic decrease in the scandalous waste of resources and destruction of the environment.

Third, Elder suggests that we need a new cultivation of reverence for life. What does he mean? Christians have always affirmed that human life is sacred and have therefore always been committed to the proposition that they ought to have a certain reverence for human life. But Christians have not so often been willing to suggest that anything else in God's creation is similarly sacred. Some theologians have called for a reverence for all life, but they have usually been branded as sentimentalists and heretics for so doing. Albert Schweitzer, one might recall, made reverence for life central to his thinking; but many other Christian theologians have branded him as essentially pantheistic and even unChristian for having held that position.

I confess that my sympathies are with Schweitzer. I am at a loss to understand how Christians can justify treating the creation which their God loves and respects with anything short of reverence. Still, Christians very often think of their environment as being merely a thing to be used as man sees fit, as being a thing with no value excepting the value it has to man. And it is precisely this lack of respect for our environment which tempts us to exploit and misuse our good earth.

And so, perhaps more than anything else, if we are to develop an ethical stance which allows for a creative response to problems of pollution and environmental imbalance, we must develop a reverence for all life, even for all creation. So far as I can see, there seems to be nothing in the way of Christians adopting an ethic of restraint, quality, and reverence for all creation. Of course, I am not suggesting that this ethic is an easy one. Taken together, the three planks call for a whole new style of life - a life marked, perhaps, by a sort of holy simplicity. Such simplicity is foreign not only to the secular tradition of the West

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but to virtually all of the West's religious tradition as well. The simpler life style demanded alike by the biblical tradition and our current crisis will be altogether new to us, and we must be prepared to endure the embarrassments and the humiliations of initiation into it. Still, biblical witness seems clear: Christians worship a God whom they believe loves his creation and has entrusted it to their care; surely then, Christians dare not do less than care for it lovingly and even sacrificially. Christians dare be nothing other than servant-kings. And perhaps this understanding of the biblical picture of man's proper relationship to his environment might prove to be at least suggestive to non-Christians as well.