

## ROUNDTABLE IN ETHICS

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### A CHRISTIAN ETHIC OF ECOLOGY

#### I. INTRODUCTION

This evening I will present a Christian ethic of ecology, speak briefly to the major competing views, and address criticisms of the Christian view. By *ecology* I refer to the care and protection of the environment<sup>1</sup>. By *environment* I mean our natural world in which live.

#### II. THE PROBLEM

Our modern world has seen an increasing sensitivity to humankind's impact on its environment,<sup>2</sup> focusing attention of the developed world on issues such as pollution, population growth, species loss, climate change, and the marring of beautiful landscapes. Meanwhile, many in the developing world, still caught in a desperate struggle for basic life necessities, remain largely inattentive to these issues.

#### III. ALTERNATIVE VIEWS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

##### A. Materialistic View Of The Environment

- Materialism (philosophical naturalism) is a view of reality that asserts that the material/physical world is all there is. It denies the existence of a spiritual, non-material reality, or of any spiritual value to the material world. It tends to see the cosmos as eternal, energy as unlimited, and humankind as capable, through knowledge and technology, of solving almost any problem.<sup>3</sup>
- With excessive confidence in humankind and no spiritual dimension, materialism's sole ecological ethic is the pragmatic survival of the species.<sup>4</sup> The effect of such pragmatism was seen in the Soviet Union's reckless exploitation of the environment as it sought to feed and arm itself.<sup>5</sup>

##### B. Pantheistic (and New Age) View Of The Environment

- Contrasted with materialism is pantheism. Pantheism believes that God is everything, and everything is God. It views all nature as possessing the divine spirit.<sup>6</sup> Such a view deifies and worships nature, as is seen in the animistic religions. It views humankind as being on the same plain with all of nature, with no claim to rule over it.<sup>7</sup>
- In regarding all nature as divine, pantheism lowers man to have no more value than a blade of grass.<sup>8</sup> This often results in human suffering through poverty and hunger, as is seen in parts of the world characterized by pantheistic religions.<sup>9</sup>
- Pantheism is a driving force in the modern ecological movement, and is characteristic of "Deep Ecology."<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE ENVIRONMENT

While widespread Evangelical focus on ecological concerns, like that of the general population, increased dramatically from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>11</sup> the foundation of a Christian ecology is as old as creation itself and is reflected throughout Church history,<sup>12</sup>

##### A. Critical Themes In Creation

- Important environmentally related themes arise in the Biblical creation account, and are developed further throughout Scripture.

##### 1. The transcendent God

- The creation account reveals the God who is eternal, who transcends His creation, and by and for whom all things are made. Further, all things continue to exist by His action.<sup>13</sup> The Biblical account counters both materialism (there is no God) and pantheism (everything is God).

##### 2. Essential separations or distinctions

- Important enduring distinctions are central to the created order. This is seen in the separation of light/darkness, day/night, sea/dry land, man/woman, categories of creation (plants, animals, etc.), and kinds.<sup>14</sup> Disregarding these distinctions destroys creation's order, inviting chaos.<sup>15</sup>

##### 3. The doctrine of mankind

- Man (humankind) was created by God as the highest order of His creation, crowned with glory and honor,<sup>16</sup> alone bearing the Imago Dei (the image of God).<sup>17</sup>
- Part of God's purpose through creation was to fill the earth with bearers of His image who would be partakers of the divine fellowship and display His glory.<sup>18</sup>
- Included in the Imago Dei is the creative nature.<sup>19</sup> While man cannot create ex nihilo, as God did, God has given him the vast resources of creation with which to create under His lordship. Far from depleting nature, man actually enhances it, becoming earth's greatest resource.<sup>20</sup>

##### 4. The significance of place

- The creation account reveals the importance of a material place as man's habitation. It reveals a good world, a region within that world called Eden, and a garden planted within Eden.<sup>21</sup>
- Man is expected to cherish, utilize, and enhance his place for his own needs and enjoyment within divinely set parameters.<sup>22</sup>
- The creation account clarifies that pristine nature is not God's ultimate intention for all of creation, but that mankind is to express the divine image of dominion and creativity by enhancing and developing his world.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. The principle of regency

- Mankind's regency over all creation is foundational to the creation account and to a biblical view of environment and ecology.
- Mankind was tasked with populating the entire world, with subduing and ruling over all created life, and with cultivating and keeping the garden in Eden.<sup>24</sup>
- Regency, or stewardship, establishes mankind as operating in God's behalf, under His lordship, to accomplish His purposes for the creation, and to provide a suitable place for man. Ultimately man will answer to God for what kind of steward he has been.<sup>25</sup>

## B. Principles Of A Christian Environmental Ethic<sup>26</sup>

### 1. Principle of Creation Value

- All creation was made by and for God, and He declared it all good. Thus all creation possesses *theistic intrinsic value*<sup>27</sup> apart from whatever value it has for mankind.<sup>28</sup>
- Whatever uses mankind makes of creation as God's regents must be done in careful regard for its theistic intrinsic value.

### 2. Principle of Sustained Order and Purpose

- God arrayed all the creation to work together to serve His ongoing purposes for the whole.<sup>29</sup>
- God's continues direct involvement in His creation, sustaining and ordering its functions for His ongoing purposes.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Principle of Corruption and Redemption

- The Bible teaches that man's sin affects creation. First, all creation is subjected to futility as a consequence of the fall, and groans for relief.<sup>31</sup> Second, man's treatment of the environment is often sinful, harming portions of the natural world.
- The Bible also teaches that the redemptive work of Christ extends beyond man to all of creation. Thus the entire creation waits for the redemption of mankind in which it will participate.<sup>32</sup> Like us, all creation will be made new. In this redeemed creation the righteous will live in fellowship with the transcendent God of creation,<sup>33</sup>

## V. SOME CHRISTIAN "PROCEDURES" FOR ECOLOGY

How then should these themes and principles inform our ecology and the environmental policies we support or oppose? When Israel was about to take possession of its own land, God gave various laws pertaining to their use and care of that land. While we are not bound by the Mosaic Laws, certain enduring principles upon which they are founded can help inform the Christian environmental ethic.<sup>34</sup>

**A. The Law Of Land Rest**

- Under the Mosaic Law, a landowner was to allow the land to lie fallow for one year out of every seven. This allowed the land rest and to rejuvenate. This law discloses two key environmental principles.

**1. Depletion**

- Man's use of the environment may deplete its vitality, and thus must be disciplined.

**2. Resiliency**

- God designed creation so that it is robust and resilient. It is capable of self-rejuvenation if we give it the opportunity to do so.<sup>35</sup>

**B. The Law Of Jubilee**

- The Law of Jubilee required that every fiftieth year land be returned to its original owner.<sup>36</sup> This reveals that though the "earth is the Lord's," the principle of regency includes private property ownership. The Law of Jubilee demonstrated how seriously God takes private property rights. Such rights help ensure that individuals act in the best interests of the land.<sup>37</sup>

**C. The Sanitation Laws**

- The Mosaic Law contained an array of sanitation laws.<sup>38</sup> Clearly God is concerned about pollution that harms the environment and its inhabitants, especially mankind.

**D. The Law Of Gleanings**

- The Law of Gleanings stipulated that a farmer was not to harvest the corners of his field. This permitted the poor to glean those corners, finding needed sustenance.

**1. Against greed**

- This law makes clear that man may use his environment freely for his own benefit, but restrains greed.

**2. Use with the poor in mind**

- Decisions regarding the use of the environment must be taken with the poor of the world in mind. Policies and practices that disregard the food and health needs of the developing nations violate this principle.

**VI. SOME CRITICISMS OF THE CHRISTIAN VIEW**

**A. The Case Of Lynn White's Famous Article**

- In 1967, UCLA professor Lynn White penned an article on the historical roots of our ecological crisis that became a sacred text of modern environmentalism.<sup>39</sup> He placed the blame for our current ills on the Christian view of creation.<sup>40</sup>
- White argued that the Genesis mandate to subdue and rule resulted in Christendom's indiscriminate raping of the environment.<sup>41</sup> Given the influential impact of White's article, and the cult-like status that it enjoyed, this misperception of what the Scriptures actually teach remains endemic within secular ecology.

- As I have already shown, the Biblical teaching of regency is a far cry from the “anything goes” ethos that White reads into the text. A number of telling critiques of White’s article have been written, including Francis Schaeffer’s *Pollution and the Death of Man*, and Alister McGrath’s *The Reenchantment of Nature*.<sup>42</sup>
- Suppressing the dominion aspect of the Imago Dei will result not in preventing dominion but in perverting it, ending in greater destruction and sin.<sup>43</sup>

## **B. Christianity Leads To Overpopulation**

- Some argue that the Biblical mandate to procreate, filling the earth, leads to overpopulation, depleting the world’s resources and destroying the environment.
- The word *overpopulation* is actually an empty term.<sup>44</sup> Neither population density nor poverty is a reliable criterion of “overpopulation.” Some the world’s wealthiest and most desirable places to live have the highest density rates, and poverty, when its real causes are eliminated, is actually alleviated by increasing population.<sup>45</sup>
- Current population growth is tapering off, and by mid century is likely to stabilize at around 8-9 billion people.<sup>46</sup> We may actually face a greater threat from a shrinking and aging population.<sup>47</sup>
- Finally, this criticism is dismissive of the glorious value of human life, creation’s greatest resource.

## **C. Christianity’s Anthropocentric Arrogance**

- Some charge that Christianity arrogantly assumes the primacy of man over the rest of nature (speciesism).
- This argument obscures the distinctions I discussed earlier that are so essential to an orderly world. The adoption of this pantheistic style egalitarianism leads to disorder and debasement of mankind as seen in those parts of the world dominated by pantheistic worldviews.
- Christianity, while maintaining the high place of man in creation, actually elevates all of nature to a place of dignity and recognizes its theistic intrinsic value. This view is not arrogant as it insists on man’s humble submission to the transcendent God of creation, who ultimately owns and cherishes all of His creation.

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Bergstrom, “Principles of a Christian Environmental Ethic: With Applications to Agriculture, Natural Resources, and the Environment,” Oct 2003, <http://www.leaderu.com/science/bergstrom-enviroethics.html>, (Mar. 2011)

<sup>2</sup> John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, pp. 264-267 (R&R Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ. 2004).

Gregory Johnson, “Motivating Evangelicals: Francis Schaeffer, Christianity Today, and Evangelical Concern for the Environment.” 1998, <http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/environment.html> , (Mar. 2011)

This increased concern was born, in part, from books like *Walden: Life in the Woods* (Henry David Thoreau, 1854), and intensified in the mid twentieth century with response to such books

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as *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson, 1962) and *Population Bomb* (Paul R. Ehrlich, 1968). Thus was born the modern ecology movement.

<sup>3</sup> Norman L Geisler, *Christian Ethics, Contemporary Issues & Options*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. p. 316-317 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Ray Bohlin, "The Environmental Ethics of Naturalism and Pantheism" in "Christian Environmentalism," 1992, <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/ecology.html> (Mar. 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment Of Nature*, Doubleday, New York, (2002) pp. 88-92

<sup>6</sup> Geisler, p. 319

<sup>7</sup> It is important to distinguish between the biblical doctrine of omnipresence and the religion of pantheism. Omnipresence teaches that God is present everywhere but is essentially distinct from his creation. Pantheism teaches that all things are, in their essence, God. The former upholds the transcendence of God taught in Scripture, the latter denies it. I may be present in a room, but neither am I the essence of the room nor is the room the essence of me.

<sup>8</sup> Bohlin

<sup>9</sup> Francis Schaeffer observed: "Those who propose the pantheistic answer ignore this fact—that far from raising nature to man's height, pantheism must push both man and nature down into a bog. Without categories, there is eventually no reason to distinguish bad nature from good nature. Pantheism leaves us with the Marquis de Sade's dictum, 'What is, is right,' in morals, and man becomes no more than the grass." Cited by Gregory Johnson in "Motivating Evangelicals," [http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/environment.html#\\_ftn11](http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/environment.html#_ftn11)

<sup>10</sup> Acton Institute, *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Wisdom on the Environment*, (Grand Rapids, MI.) 2007, p. 69

Deep Ecology is a movement first labeled by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer in 1973. It refers to that element of the ecological movement that calls for a fundamental change in values and beliefs when addressing ecological issues. It promotes a view of all living things as having equal intrinsic value, and thus is an ideal bedfellow for pantheism. <http://www.deepecology.org/movement.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Johnson

<sup>12</sup> McGrath, pp. 26-52

<sup>13</sup> Gen. 1; Col. 1:16, 17; Heb. 1:3

<sup>14</sup> Cornwall Alliance, *A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Examination of the Theology, Science, and Economics of Global Warming*; p. 5 <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/a-renewed-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor.pdf>, (Mar. 2011)

<sup>15</sup> Bergstrom, p. 4

<sup>16</sup> Ps. 8:4-8

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 1:27; Ps. 8:4, 5. In this regard man is distinct from the rest of creation. Man alone possesses a spirit capable of fellowship and intimacy with the transcendent God.

<sup>18</sup> John 17

<sup>19</sup> Cornwall, p. 8

<sup>20</sup> Cornwall, p. 12

<sup>21</sup> Gen. 1, 2, Call, p. 12

<sup>22</sup> Gen. 1:28; 2:15, 16: 3:17-19

<sup>23</sup> Cornwall, pp. 8, 11-13

Acton. p. 49

<sup>24</sup> Gen. 1:28; 2:15

<sup>25</sup> I Cor. 4:2

<sup>26</sup> Bergstrom. I am indebted to Dr. Bergstrom for this particular way of contemplating a Christian view of the environment.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher B. Barrett and John C. Bergstrom. "The Economics of God's Creation," Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists. Issue 31, Spring, 1998:4-23. Cited by Bergstrom. Barrett and Bergstrom use this term to mean that all created things have an intrinsic value given to them by God, and they possess that value independent of any value they have to mankind.

<sup>28</sup> This is reflected in the fact that vast portions of God's created cosmos may likely never be seen, appreciated, or utilized by mankind.

<sup>29</sup> Psa. 104

<sup>30</sup> Psa. 104; Col. 1:17

<sup>31</sup> Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:20-22

<sup>32</sup> Rom. 8:21

<sup>33</sup> Rev. 21:1-8

<sup>34</sup> Geisler, pp. 325-326

<sup>35</sup> Cornwall, p. 6

<sup>36</sup> Lev. 25:10-28

<sup>37</sup> Acton, pp. 77, 100-108

<sup>38</sup> Lev. 13-15

<sup>39</sup> Lynn White, Jr., *Historical Roots Of Our Ecological Crisis*, 1967,) [http://www.siena.edu/ellard/historical\\_roots\\_of\\_our\\_ecologic.htm](http://www.siena.edu/ellard/historical_roots_of_our_ecologic.htm), (Feb. 2011)

<sup>40</sup> McGrath, p. xiv-xviii

<sup>41</sup> In his concluding comments, White asserts: "Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

<sup>42</sup> For example, McGrath says: "The argument is now recognized to be seriously flawed." Additionally he cites Jeremy Cohen's assessment that White handles the biblical text in a "critically illiterate manner."

<sup>43</sup> An example of this is China's attempt at constricting the procreation aspect of the Imago Dei. The result has been the slaughter of millions of human beings while many families in China surreptitiously circumvent the law in order to have more than one child.

<sup>44</sup> Acton, pp. 85, 86

<sup>45</sup> Acton p. 85

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “World Population to 2300,” <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/longrange2/WorldPop2300final.pdf>, (Mar. 2011)

U.S. Census Bureau, “World Population: 1950-2050,” <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/worldpopgraph.php>, (Mar. 2011)

<sup>47</sup> Acton, p. 87

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