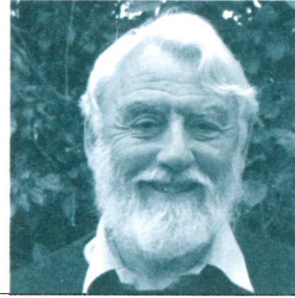


# IS RELIGION BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?<sup>1</sup>

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**IN 1967, AN AMERICAN HISTORIAN, LYNN WHITE, PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE ON 'THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF OUR ECOLOGIC CRISIS'.<sup>2</sup> His diagnosis was blunt:**

Christian arrogance towards nature 'bears a huge burden of guilt' for the current environmental crisis. The idea that God gave humankind dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1.26,28) has led to the attitude that, 'We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim. We shall have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason but to serve man.'

A Government White Paper in 1990 (the formal statement of the UK's position to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992) made a similar point: 'Ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, we have had an almost boundless faith in our own intelligence and in the benign consequences of our actions. Whatever the discoveries of science, whatever the rates at which we destroyed other species, whatever the changes we made to our seas and landscapes, we have believed that the world would remain much the same as in all its fundamentals. We now *know* [my emphasis] that this is no longer true ... Increasingly we understand that the ways we produce energy, use natural resources and produce waste threaten to change fundamentally the balance of our natural environment. We may not be seeing the end of Nature, but Nature is certainly under threat ... The starting point [for action] ... is the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental policies. Mankind has always been capable of great good and great evil. That is certainly true of our role as custodians of the planet.'<sup>3</sup>

## THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

White erred in assuming that God's first command to humankind 'to have dominion' over all living things gave an automatic and unrestricted licence to use the Earth for our own purposes. Although the word translated 'dominion' certainly relates to kingly conquest and rule, in the context of Genesis it does not mean despotic sovereignty; rather it should be taken to imply the Hebraic ideal of kingship, which was responsible loving care, typified by David, Solomon and Jesus himself (Ps 72). Furthermore, the command was given to humankind made 'in God's image'. Whatever the full implication of this, one aspect must surely be that we reflect some of God's reliability or responsibility; the biblical God is not fickle or capricious. Genesis tells us that we are charged with the responsible care of all creation – a task that is given to men and women everywhere. Like it or not, we are

God-appointed stewards. If we fail, we are disobeying God.

White's arguments have become part of a widespread belief that Christianity has been a major cause of damaging attitudes towards the environment. Whilst it cannot be denied that Bible misunderstanding has contributed to such attitudes, we need to bear in mind that no religion (or philosophy, such as Marxism or Confucianism) has in practice been effective in preventing or even retarding environmental degradation.

## CHRISTIAN BELIEF

Is there a moral basis for creation care? Is our relationship to the environment wholly pragmatic and self-interested?

The Church of England produced a statement before the Earth Summit in 1992 that began: 'We all share and depend on the same world with its finite and often non-renewable resources. Christians believe that this world belongs to God by creation, redemption and sustaining, and that he has entrusted it to humankind, made in his image; we are in the position of stewards'<sup>4</sup>

This assertion is wholly biblical:

1. (a) We live in God's world (Ps 24.1); devised, designed and made from nothing by God (Gen 1.1; Job 38.2–6; Ps 8.3; 19.1; 104; Heb 1.2; Rev 4.11) and separate from him (creation is to be respected and tended [Gen 2.15] but not worshipped [Is 44.9–20] – that is pantheism); (b) God is the redeemer and sustainer of creation (Is 40.28; Jn 3.16; Col 1.17–20; Heb 1.3). He is not simply a distant designer but an indwelling and active upholder and guide as well. In theological language, God is both transcendent and immanent; (c) the purpose of creation is to praise God (Ps 65.13; 96.11–13; 98.7–9; 148.7–10; Prov 8:22–30; Rev 5:13).

2. God has entrusted his creation to us (Gen 1.26–28; 2.15; Deut 11.12; Ps 115.16). In John Stott's words, 'The Earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation. This does not mean that God has handed it over to us in such a way as to relinquish his own right over it, but rather that he has given us the responsibility to preserve and develop the Earth on his behalf.'<sup>5</sup>

3. God holds us responsible for the Earth's care (Lev 26; Deut 28; Mt 25.14–30). We are told to till (or tend) and look after the Earth (Gen 2.15); this implies active care, not defiant preservation as if we were curators of a museum.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper which first appeared in *Dialogue* 20 (April 2003).

<sup>2</sup> White's article originally appeared in *Science* 155 (1967), 1203–7. It is included in many anthologies of environmental ethics, including RJ Berry (ed.), *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *This Common Inheritance* (CM 1200; London: HMSO, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Christians and the Environment* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991), p. 367.

<sup>5</sup> John Stott, 'Care for Creation' (December 1999), available at <http://prov.ca/institution/eye-witness/ew-s06-creation-care-conference.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of stewardship has been criticised from a number of view points. See RJ Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Michael Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm* (London: IB Taurus, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> NT Wright, 'New exodus, new inheritance: the narrative substructure of Romans 3–8', in SK Soderlund and NT Wright (eds.), *In Romans and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26–35.



## 'environmental care is embedded in the heart of biblical faith'

### NOTES

9 *Ibid.*, p. 35.  
10 NT Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth* (Cambridge: Grove Booklets, 1999), p. 12.

11 CEB Cranfield, 'Some observations on Romans 8:19-21', in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 224-30.

12 See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin, 2000).

13 The counter that many of these examples are exaggerated scare stories is easy to refute. For example, an attempted and well-publicised rubbishing of claims about environmental damage by a Danish social scientist, Bjorn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), although lauded by the *Economist*, was answered in detail in *Scientific American* (January 2002).

14 This case is made strongly by the Working Group on Climate Change and Development in *Up in Smoke?* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2004); and *Africa Up in Smoke?* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2005).

15 Martin Holdgate, *From Care to Action* (London: Earthscan, 1996), p. 145.

### ►THE CHURCH'S APATHY

Why is the Church so apathetic, almost allergic, to the clear teaching of Scripture about creation-care? One reason is probably the persistence of the idea that the world is much the same as it was when God created it, albeit marred by the effects of Adam's sin. This belief in lack of change is compounded and confused by the Platonic notion of unchangeability which infected the early Church and still lingers. It has encouraged 'creationists' in their battles with 'evolutionists' and retarded thereby the development of a robust and biblically based doctrine of creation.

But more potent is the assumption (particularly in western Christendom) that the world is 'only' a stage provided for God's saving work through Christ's life, death and resurrection. The effect is that we behave as if the world is nothing more than a neutral frame for our lives. God is not so much rejected and disbelieved as ignored. He is treated as unnecessary and irrelevant in his own world. If he is truly almighty and all-holy, it is no wonder that he condemns us, and cuts us off from fellowship with him – although it would be better to say that we have alienated ourselves from him.

This attitude is complicated by certain apocalyptic beliefs: if the Lord is coming soon to take his ransomed to 'a better place', there is little point in looking after this world. Indeed, we may (so it is argued) be delaying his second coming by not allowing the 'signs' to be worked out.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, both pre- and post-millennarianists are among those least likely to be environmentally concerned. For Tom Wright, 'when discussing the future hope of Christians, it is important that Romans 8, seen as Paul's reworking of the Exodus-shaped "inheritance" theme, is given full weight. It is not sufficient to speak of "eternal life" on the basis of, e.g. Romans 5:21 and 6:23, and to assume that this refers to a generalized "heaven" such as characterized in much common Christian tradition. Paul's expectation was more specific: "the life of the coming age" (an expanded translation of *zoe aionios*) was to be enjoyed, not in "heaven" as opposed to "Earth", but in the renewed, redeemed creation that has itself shared the Exodus-experience of the people of God.'<sup>8</sup> Wright is categorical: 'the renewal of God's covenant results in the renewal of God's creation. Romans expounded the fall of Adam (1.18-32, made explicit in 5.12-21). How is the fall of Adam reversed? Clearly, through Christ: but when Paul talks of the work of Christ (and of the Spirit, which implements the work of Christ) he uses explicit "new covenant" language to do

it ... The result of the renewal of the covenant, according to regular prophetic Jewish literature, is the renewal of creation. That is why in Romans 4:13, Paul says that the promise of Abraham and his seed was that they should inherit – not the land as one might expect – but the world, the cosmos. When God does for his people what he intends to do for them, the whole cosmos, the whole creation will be renewed as well. The wilderness and the barren land will celebrate.'<sup>9</sup>

Wright argues that Paul had the Exodus story in mind in Romans 5-8, drawing a parallel between the redemption experienced by the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land with the redemption of all humankind in the new creation of which we are heirs. He grieves that Roman 8.18-28 'is regularly marginalized in mainstream Protestant interpretations. If you insist on reading Romans simply as a book about human beings getting "saved" in the sense of "going to heaven when they die", you will find that these verses function as a kind of odd apocalyptic appendix. That in consequence is how the tradition has often regarded them, both in the "radical" scholarship of Lutherans like Bultmann and Käsemann and in the conservative readings of much evangelical scholarship. In fact the passage is the deliberate and carefully planned climax to the whole train of thought in Romans 1-8 as a whole.'<sup>10</sup>

We can go further with Romans 8:19-22. Where the text speaks of creation 'being frustrated', Charles Cranfield uses a magnificent *reductio ad absurdum* argument. He asks: 'What sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation – the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn or the planet Venus – suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence? The answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties, and all the varied chorus of sub-human life, created for God's glory, is cheated of its fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God's praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways, but since their praise is destined to be not a collection of individual offerings but part of a magnificent whole, the united praise of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that for which they were created to be, so long as man's part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would



## 'Creation-care is not a defining trait of modern-day Christianity'

be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.<sup>11</sup>

The seemingly inescapable inference is that environmental care is embedded in the heart of biblical faith: it is a responsibility imposed on us all from the time of creation and it is inseparable from the witness of those redeemed by Christ. Environmentalism is not one among many priorities or options, but an obligation laid on all – and one which demands a response. Looking after creation is an integral part of religious commitment.

### A NEEDY WORLD

Creation care is not a defining trait of modern-day Christianity. Religious people too often simply follow secular concerns about environmental damage. The 'world' is more worried about a sustainable future than religion. Alarm bells are sounding ever louder: the hazards of persistent pesticides,<sup>12</sup> the dangers from chemical manufacturing highlighted by the explosions at Bhopal; radiation following Chernobyl; pollution following damage to oil tankers; holes in the ozone layer with a subsequent epidemic in skin cancer; growing climatic instability leading to droughts, floods and a surge in insurance claims; declines in birds like lapwings, larks, sparrows, and even starlings; the list goes on and on.<sup>13</sup> The 'world' has responded with constraints and conferences. Parliaments have legislated about pollution, planning, recycling and wildlife protection. The first UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972. It has been followed by conferences on urbanisation, population, and most notably on environment and development (the 'Earth Summit') in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, followed by a second Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 (the 'World Conference on Sustainable Development').

Increasingly, the emphasis has focused on the crucial need to avoid permanent and irreversible damage to the planet. In 1980, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature produced a 'World Conservation Strategy' showing that development (including the alleviation of poverty)<sup>14</sup> and environmental conservation were inseparable. If industrialisation, social advancement, etc., neglect the environment it will be unsustainable; the communities concerned will be poisoned and then starved by their own effluvia and the destruction of nature's 'services' (i.e. photosynthesis, flood control, detoxification, etc.). Conversely, conservation without development is nothing more than selfish protectionism.

The idea of 'sustainability' was taken up and came into common usage through the work of the Brundtland Commission, whose report *Our Common Future* was published in 1987. The report defined sustainable development as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Mrs Thatcher paraphrased it: 'we do not hold a freehold on our world, but only a full repairing lease. We have a moral duty to look after our world and hand it on in good order to future generations.' The Government White Paper already cited commented on this, 'That is what the experts mean when they talk of "sustainable development": not sacrificing tomorrow's prospects for a largely illusory gain today.' Crispin Tickell put it, 'Treating the Earth as if we mean to stay.'

### CONCLUSION

Martin Holdgate, former Chief Scientist at the Department of the Environment has written: 'Progress will not come through preaching or Summit Declarations, however enlightened ... Debate must go on ... But it does appear that some guiding values are apparent and that they seek to link what strikes at the mind and heart as ethically sound principles, with the mind's fear of what may happen otherwise and with our calculations of personal and group advantage. These universal themes are a recognition: (1) that long-term sustainability must be an object of policy now; (2) that equity between peoples and nations in their use of, and impact on, the finite resources and vulnerable systems of the planet must be improved; and (3) that personal obligations to other people and to the world of nature need to be codified and communicated.'<sup>15</sup>

God has written two books: a book of words, which we call the Bible; and a book of works, which is creation. Psalm 19 is explicit about the two. Four centuries ago, Francis Bacon wrote: 'Let no one think or maintain that he can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's works; but rather let all endeavour an endless progress or proficiencie in both.' The two books have the same author. They are written in very different languages, but we have no excuse if we fail to read them both because of difficulty or (worse) laziness in interpretation. Those who read only one of God's books will necessarily discover only a part of God's nature and purposes. ■